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AYELET TSABARI

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Ayelet Tsabari

THE BEST PLACE ON EARTH

STORIES

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TIKKUN

I'm just about to cross the street to Café Rimon when I see Natalie sitting on the shaded patio and my heart skips, trips and falls over itself. I stop walking, pull my squished cigarette pack out from the back pocket of my jeans, tap it and dig out a half-smoked cigarette. Then I lean against the stone wall behind me and light it.

Downtown Jerusalem is busy at midday. Cars creep along the congested street, music pouring out from their open windows. The narrow sidewalks—made narrower by the goods overflowing from the storefronts—are swarming with people, lugging bags from the Mahane Yehuda Market. Orthodox high-school girls in long skirts saunter by me, giggling when they pass three young soldiers with kippahs on their heads, M-16s slung over their shoulders. Across the street, a group of pink-faced tourists—probably Christian pilgrims who have disregarded the warnings against travelling to Israel in these dangerous times—take photos

of themselves next to an unremarkable alley. Natalie is hidden and revealed in intervals, glimpsed in the gaps between the vehicles and faces, through bus windows, a choppy sequence of still images, like a stop-motion video.

It's been seven years since I last saw her. After we broke up—and by broke up, I mean she ripped my heart out of my chest and stomped on it with both feet—she sort of disappeared. She lost touch with all of the friends we had back then. No one knew where she lived or what she was up to. No one ever ran into her. She was just gone.

I flick my cigarette butt on the asphalt, my eyes trying to register what they see, my brain slow to compute. At first I try to convince myself that it doesn't mean what I think it means. Of course she would look different. She's thirty-five now, no longer the twenty-something Natalie from my memories, with the thick black curls she used to braid with shells and beads, the flimsy wrap skirts she had brought from India, the tie-dyed halter tops that exposed her delicate, jutting shoulder blades. There must be a perfectly good reason—other than the obvious—why she'd be covering her hair, wearing a skirt down to her ankles and a long-sleeved shirt on a summer day. Orthodox women don't usually wear glittery and bohemian-looking scarves like that as a head scarf, don't let strands of hair fall out on the sides. They definitely don't look that smoking hot in clothes designed to make them invisible to men like me.

A part of me wants to walk away, pretend I haven't seen her, keep my memory of her undisturbed. But then a businessman jaywalks into traffic while speaking loudly into his phone, setting off a series of honks and yells, and Natalie looks up at the commotion, and her gaze wanders over and fixes on me. I've been staring for so long that I've almost forgotten she can see me too. Her face

broadens in surprise, then brightens. She extends her arm for a wave. I cross the street, wishing I had shaved this morning.

"Lior." She stands up, her eyes glinting like two spoons. We don't hug, the space between us thick with past embraces, with a history of touching.

"Wow, Natalie, you're . . ."

"Dossit," she completes my sentence, smiling as if she's swallowed sunshine.

"This is huge," I say, and she laughs. I quickly give her the once-over: her skirt is embroidered with flowers at the hem, her shirt is a vintage tunic with a floral print. Of course, she's a hippie-dossit: one of those cool New Age Orthodox Jews—often former Tel Avivians—who found God but didn't lose their chic. "Wow." I stroke the stubble on my chin. "I had no idea."

"Seven years now. Baruch Hashem." She gazes up. God bless.

"Seven years," I repeat. Right after we broke up.

"If you're shocked now you should have seen me then." She laughs again. "I was much stricter in the beginning. I had myself covered from head to toe."

"No kidding," I say. My mind is struggling to reconstruct the past seven years, replace the set of imaginary lives I'd created for her in my head. An ashram in the desert, a commune in the Galilee, a temple in India. Never this.

"Your hair," she says with a quick jerk of her chin.

"Yeah." I rub my shaved head, the smooth patch in the middle I'm grateful she can't see. "All gone."

"You look good like that."

"And you're married." I gesture at the head scarf.

"Yes." Her smile seems to fade a little. "Remember Gadi?"

I frown.

"Sure you do. He was in my Judaism class in university."

Natalie used to complain about being forced to take Judaism classes as a part of the curriculum at Bar-Ilan University. Gadi—an American who had moved from New York to find his inner Jew—came over to our house a couple of times to help her study.

"We've been married for six years now."

"Wow." It's like she's dug her fingernail into a scab, unearthing an old wound. Fucking Gadi. I knew he was trying to get into her pants. Natalie said I was crazy.

"It was after we broke up," she quickly adds.

I nod and smile because I don't know what else to do. "And kids? You probably have a troop by now." By the way her face crumbles, tightens around the lips, I know I've asked the wrong question. "Sorry," I say.

Her tan cheeks turn burgundy. "It's okay."

We both look away. I use the opportunity to scan the patio, which I would have done earlier had I not been distracted. A couple holding hands over a half-eaten Greek salad, a young mother rocking a stroller with one hand while flipping through a magazine with the other, an old man bent over a notebook, two female soldiers sharing a cigarette. One of them glances at me, sizing me up. We are all trained to identify potential threats.

"So what are you doing in Jerusalem?" Natalie asks.

"House-sitting in Ein Kerem."

"Alone?"

"Yeah." I slide my hands into my pockets and hike up my jeans. "My girlfriend stayed in Tel Aviv. Listen, can I join you?"

"Actually, I was just leaving."

"It's a public place," I say. "It's not like we're in a closed room or anything."

She glances around the patio, checks her phone and finally says, "Why not? A cup of coffee. It's been so long."

I slide into the chair opposite her and she heads to the washroom. I follow her with my gaze, the outline of her hips against her skirt. Shelly, the young waitress-slash-film student whom I met here earlier this week shakes her head at me with a smile.

Natalie and I were twenty-two when we met. We had both just moved to Tel Aviv, me from the suburbs, her from a kibbutz in the Galilee. We worked at the same bar on Sheinkin—back when Sheinkin was the place to be—saving money for the big trip after the army. We fell in love like you do in your twenties, drowning into each other, blending until the boundaries of our selves blurred. It was the nineties: the Gulf War was over, Rabin was elected prime minister and everyone thought peace was possible, and that soon we'd be partying in Beirut, eating hummus in Damascus and driving along the Mediterranean coast to Turkey. Tel Aviv was just gaining a reputation for being a party capital—ir lelo hafsaka—the city that never stops, and magazines in London and New York began covering its nightlife, including it on lists for the best clubs, the best beaches. Natalie and I rented an apartment on Shalom Aleichem, not too far from the beach, with old painted tile floors and a rounded white balcony, which we decorated with furniture we found by dumpsters. We smoked sandy grass from Egypt in bongs that we had bought at a twenty-four-hour kiosk, had sex in the washrooms of bars, and sat at a beach restaurant at four in the morning drinking hot water with mint leaves and eating hummus between swims in the dark, velvety waters of the Mediterranean. On weekends we hitched rides to trance parties in forests and did

ecstasy, and on holidays we went to Sinai, slept in a straw hut by the sea and played backgammon with the Bedouins. We felt like we were a part of a generation, and that life had been made just for us and we'd never be sick and never grow old and nothing bad would ever happen to us. Now, more than a decade later, Rabin is dead after being assassinated at a peace rally; suicide bombers explode in buses and cafés; our friends have all moved to the suburbs, bought apartments and had kids; Natalie is a married Orthodox and I'm unemployed and dating a twenty-four-year-old.

We order coffee. Cappuccino for her, Turkish for me. I try not to stare but it's hard. Her face is the same, heart-shaped and smiling—her default expression—and her skin flawless, tiny wrinkles just starting by her eyes. Maybe it's my staring but she seems restless; she fiddles with everything on the table, her eyes darting around the patio. She checks her messages. "Gadi is in New York till tomorrow," she says. "His mom is not doing so well."

"Sorry," I say. "Why didn't you go? I'd kill to get out of here right now."

"Work," she says. "Couldn't get out of school. How about you? Still in computers?"

"Actually, the company just folded."

"I'm sorry."

"Whatever." I flick my lighter on and off. "Maybe I'll move to New Zealand or something."

She laughs. "And do what?"

"I don't know, herd sheep?"

She waves her hand. "You love it here."

"Not as much as I used to."

She studies the table. I squint up at the stone balconies hunched over the street, their wooden shutters crooked and blackened

with car exhaust. I realize that things have changed, that there are certain topics we better not talk about, things we'd probably never agree on. Our fathers' right to this land, for one, which rules out both politics and religion, since in this country the two are joined in a suffocating embrace. But then again, we almost never talked about these things when we were together. We were pseudo-hippies; we wanted everyone to get along so we wouldn't feel guilty for the terrible things that were happening in the world while we made love not war. Sometimes it's better not to know; it can make you crazy. On the way here I saw people huddling around the TV screen at a convenience store, the air around them rigid with alarm. Mouths open, heads shaking, tongues clucking. A pigua in Haifa, they said. Nine dead. I didn't bother to stop. The only advantage to knowing that there was a suicide bombing earlier today is that it makes me feel safer now. It's a warped logic, based in fear. You take what you can.

Natalie grabs a packet of brown sugar, rips the edge of it and dumps its contents into her cappuccino. She then spoons the sugary foam into her mouth just as it starts to melt. No stirring. I sip my coffee and hold back a smile. Some things never change.

"So why are you really in Jerusalem?" she asks, pulling the polished spoon out from between her dark lips.

I lean back in my seat. "How much time do you have?"

It has been a rough few months. Since the second intifada started, the entire country has been going through a mid-life crisis: the economy crashed, the high-tech bubble burst, the hotels on the seawall emptied, their windows dark. When I was a teenager, the city was full of tourists; my friends and I used to hit on them on beaches, offering to help when we saw them carrying backpacks on street corners, fingers to maps.

While I avoided reading the newspapers or watching the news, carefully constructing a bubble in which I could function without losing my mind, my girlfriend, Efrat, pored over every page, was glued to the screen, the cold blue light washing over her face. She stopped using public transit, rarely went out, stayed away from the crowded, open Carmel Market, shopping instead at a smaller, pricier mini-market, where the produce wasn't as fresh but where no suicide bomber would waste his ammunition. It was as though she was in a perpetual state of waiting—for the next news flash, the next bomb to explode, the next series of phone calls to friends and family to make sure no one had been hurt. On top of it all, the anxiety medication she had been prescribed reduced her sex drive to nil. When she refused to go out with me in the evenings, I went by myself, finding reasons to stay out later, pushing her out of my bubble—my safe zone—the gap between us widening.

Then, on my way back from my parents' place I ran over a kitten. I was driving south on the right lane of Ayalon Highway, under bridges and overpasses, when I saw the little bugger—its eyes like tiny headlights—coming out of nowhere into my lane, as if on a suicide mission. I came to a screeching stop, turned my distress lights on and stepped outside. The kitten was splayed on the asphalt, not much bigger than my palm, mouth open in mid-scream, the blood still red and warm underneath it, its insides purple and pink and brown. He probably belonged to no one, another stray that would eat from garbage cans and one day impregnate another cat and make a litter of redundant kitties no one would ever give a shit about. But seeing it there, its blood soaking into the asphalt, something broke in me.

I drove home sobbing; the city's skyline loomed ahead, giant ads with skinny models draped on the sides of buildings. The radio

played sad songs because there had been two attacks that day. I was sniffling and howling, snot and tears running down my chin. When I walked through the door, eyes red, face wet and wrinkled, Efrat jumped off the couch, a hand over her mouth. "Oh my God. What happened?"

"I ran over a kitten," I said, and saying it aloud made me burst into another series of ugly, unmanly sobs.

"A kitten?" She stared at me, confused, then she tried touching me, saying, "I'm so sorry, baby," but I shook her off, shuffled into my office, played video games till two in the morning and smoked all of our grass.

I spent the following week in my sweatpants. I smoked too much pot, watched TV, slept into the afternoon. Outside our apartment, life went on, the city carried on its incessant buzzing, while I was frozen inside. Something was wrong. I realized that every step in our relationship had been initiated by Efrat, as if she was holding the road map and I was just tagging along. She asked to be monogamous; she suggested we move in together. I started to wonder: Now what? Was I supposed to be an adult? To know what I wanted? To marry Efrat? Have children? And some nights—I don't tell Natalie this part—I thought of her. Over the years, in her absence, she had become mythical. Every woman I'd ever dated was required to fill her enormous shoes, and failed.

A friend was going away to India and needed someone to watch his house in Ein Kerem, a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Jerusalem—more like a village, really—where artists lived in old Arabic stone houses covered with vines. It was the end of summer, and Tel Aviv was steeped in its own juices, smelling of ripe garbage and swathed in dust and sand. Even the nights were sticky, offering no reprieve. I had been dreaming about getting away,

wishing I could afford a flight somewhere. Anywhere. Jerusalem, with its dry air and cooler nights, was the closest thing to Europe.

Natalie is listening to everything without saying a word, nodding in the right places. She's no longer fidgeting, as if listening to my problems makes her forget about hers.

"Do you love her?" she says.

"Well, yeah," I say. "I think. I want to."

"You want to?"

"I don't know," I say. "They're not new, these doubts. They've just been getting worse. I've been asking myself these questions pretty much from the beginning. How do you know when someone is right? How do you know when it's over? Is a mediocre relationship better than being alone? Do I love her enough? What's enough?"

"That's the problem with you seculars," Natalie says. "You ask too many questions."

"I always thought I'd know more at thirty-five. I'm not where I thought I'd be."

"Clearly, neither am I," Natalie says. She empties a sugar packet onto a saucer and draws in it with a toothpick. A flower. A heart.

"I'm sorry," I say. I still can't get my head around it. I got Natalie pregnant twice. The first time was in the alley behind Haminzar, her unshaven legs wrapped around me, scratching my bum. We were wasted on arak and lemonade, and she wasn't on the pill and I guess I pulled out too late. Natalie was very businesslike about the abortion: there were no tears, no talk about options; she wanted it done.

It was different the second time around. We were on her parents' bed in the kibbutz when we discovered that if I did a little motion, a little in and up, I hit her G spot and it drove her wild. We didn't

use anything because she was on the last day of her period. The night we found out she was pregnant again, we sat on the dingy couch that took up most of our balcony, bare feet against the rusty railing, and for about an hour or two we entertained thoughts of keeping it: talking names, buying a minivan, renting a little house by the water with a porch and a hammock. But we were twenty-four and had bodies full of drugs and alcohol and cigarettes, and we had no money and still hadn't gone to university. We sat on that couch until morning, drank red wine straight from the bottle and cried for what would never be.

"There must be a way," I say.

"Trust me, at this point I'd do anything." She looks into her cup, swirls what's left of her coffee. "It's complicated. We've been trying for six years. Gadi is waiting for a miracle. Our relationship is . . ." She trails off, stiffens. "I shouldn't be talking to you about this."

"Come on. You're talking to a friend about your problems. I just talked about mine for like, an hour, and they don't seem quite as important as yours."

"What about you?" she says.

"What, children?" I snort. "You're kidding, right? Look around you. Why would anybody want to raise children in this country?"

She looks at the street, fingers the silver chain around her neck—its pendant buried under her collar—and says quietly, "God has a plan."

Natalie had always had some sort of faith. When we were travelling in India, it was the holy cities where she wanted to stay the longest. In Varanasi she started meditating; in Pushkar she went on a silent retreat. All I wanted to do in India was get high, preferably on a tropical beach. Natalie found solace in yoga, meditation, a bit of Buddhism, a dash of Kabbalah. She

believed in a supportive universe, in things like manifestation, karma and tikkun: the kabbalistic idea of repairing or correcting past mistakes in order to achieve balance in the world. A part of me admired her for that; I loved that it was her own thing, that it wasn't rooted in religion. Another part of me thought it was a hippie mishmash of spiritual nonsense, with holes large enough to drive a truck through.

"Maybe I don't have the believer chip," I tell Natalie. "I'm just not wired that way, I'm too cynical. Don't know if I can change it."

"You can't force it," she says.

"Can I get you guys anything else?" Shelly saunters over, a whiff of cocoa butter and coffee beans. "A halvah Danish?" She winks at me.

"Not today." I smile.

"Just the bill," Natalie says.

We watch Shelly walking away and Natalie says, "She likes you."

I shrug it off, examine the hardened remains of my coffee, finding patterns in the muddy grounds. An ambulance speeds through the street, and everyone on the patio turns to look. Natalie's neck lengthens, revealing a Star of David pendant hanging on her silver chain.

"Do you ever think about our time together?" I say.

Natalie turns her head quickly, giving me an alarmed look. "Don't do that, Lior."

"I'm just curious," I say.

She holds her cup in both hands, choosing words. "To be honest, I don't think about it much. Sometimes I remember things, but it's like remembering a dream, something that happened in a movie. To a different woman."

I swallow; my mouth is dry. I feel like such an idiot.

She glances at her phone and says she must go. "It was good to see you, Lior. Take care of yourself, will you?"

I stand up, raise my hand to touch her and then tuck it into my pocket instead. "Good luck."

"Be'ezrat Hashem," she says. God willing.

I watch her disappear into the crowd, and my heart crumples in my chest. Shelly strides over, piles our plates and coffee mugs on a tray. "What was that about?" she asks.

"What?"

"You and this . . . dossit." She raises one eyebrow.

"Long story." I smile tightly.

"So . . . I'm almost done." She shifts on one hip, the tray perched on her arm. "Want to grab a drink?"

"At this hour?" I laugh.

"I thought you were from Tel Aviv." She stares at me without blinking.

I eye her, contemplate the possibility. She has warm hazelnut eyes, and she's wearing a vintage blue dress with a gold belt and gold ballerina shoes. She's probably twenty-two, in her experimental slutty phase. I try to pretend I'm single; slip it on like a new shirt. I'm curious if I still have it, if I can do it without feeling guilty, if I'd think about Efrat at all.

"Here." She grabs my wrist, pulls a pen from the pocket of her apron and scrawls a number. "If you change your mind."

The bus is full of passengers with their grocery bags. It smells like cilantro and fish. I stand by the back door, a quick escape route, and watch through the smeared glass as the city lets up, gives way to valleys and hills. It's hard to believe Jerusalem is only forty minutes away

from Tel Aviv because it feels like another world. Efrat hates it, says it's too busy and dirty and rundown, the streets too crowded, the people too intense. She gets migraines whenever she's here.

The bus is almost empty by the time it drops me at Ein Kerem, the rush and chaos of Jerusalem left behind. Ein Kerem, tucked up in the city's sleeve, is bathed in warm afternoon light. I walk to my new home, sit on the couch outside and watch the valley, spread open like the palm of one's hand. I turn on my cell, glancing at Shelly's number on my wrist when the phone rings.

"Thank God," Efrat says. "I was going crazy. Your phone was off."

"Sorry," I say.

"You can't do that. There was a pigua in Jerusalem. And your mom was looking for you. She didn't even know you were in Jerusalem."

"Shit," I say. "I forgot to tell her."

"Well, it's irresponsible, Lior. The least you can do is leave your cell on."

"I said I'm sorry."

She's quiet. I can hear her sucking cigarette smoke. "I miss you," she says.

"Efrat, we talked about this. I just need time to figure shit out."

"I just said I missed you. Why do you have to be such a jerk?"

I sigh, suddenly exhausted. "I came here to take a break. Please."

"Fine," she says. "Whatever."

It's almost evening by the time I drag myself off the couch and decide to go for a walk, be a tourist, anything to distract me from my head. I climb up the path to Hama'ayan Street, where three narrow roads

meet at Mary's Spring. It's quiet before sunset, the pilgrims and tourists and idling buses all gone. A mosque towers over the spring, with a crescent and a star perched on its spire. I follow the trickling sound of water under a stone archway, disturbing a nun who's bent over the shallow pool, washing her face in the stream from the rock-hewn tunnel. It's musty and cool underneath the curved, low ceilings. On the wall, a sign advises visitors against drinking the water many of them consider holy. I have seen pilgrims fill plastic bottles with this stuff. I wait until the nun leaves and lean over, let a few icy drops into my mouth. It tastes like rain: earthy and fresh.

I hike up the wide, stone-paved stairs to the Church of the Visitation. The road is empty, except for a young souvenir vendor leaning against his modest stall: wooden crosses and rosaries dangling from hooks, fluttering scarves tied over a pole, postcards stacked on a rotating stand. He nods at me and continues to play on his phone. The valley yawns to my right, lush with olive and cypress trees, and the hillside is terraced and capped with clusters of stone houses. The setting sun is bouncing off distant car mirrors and water heaters on roofs.

I'm breathless by the time I make it all the way to the top of the stairs, where a large wrought-iron gate leads to a stone courtyard, a church and a bell tower with a spiky tip. A huge mosaic covers the front wall, rimmed with gold: three flying angels, a woman riding a horse, her arms crossed against her chest. The place is breezy and graveyard-quiet, the kind of quiet that hums, that clings to you the way humidity does in the city. I think I'm alone but then I notice a monk—his face warmly lit by the setting sun—sitting on a bench in what I realize is an actual cemetery: a few graves laid between trees and bushes. He's looking over the valley; doesn't move, doesn't see me, like a statue.

I walk up a few more stairs, drawn to the sound of voices singing in some language I can't make out. The visitors spill out just as I reach the door to the chapel and I lower my gaze, afraid they can see through me, know I don't belong. Once they are gone I peer in. The high ceilings are covered in murals, depicting scenes I don't recognize from stories I don't know. The setting sun tints the paintings a rich orange, drawing long shadows on the tiled floor. I sit in a pew and try to feel something that isn't discomfort. I shift in my seat and the wood creaks, then echoes, amplified. Maybe God is here. Maybe I've never felt him because I've looked in all the wrong places. I close my eyes and try to concentrate, breathe, meditate. I try. I really fucking try. I feel nothing.

My phone rings. A priest I haven't noticed before glares at me. I apologize and hurry outside to answer, surprised to hear Natalie on the other end.

"Lior." Her voice is choked. "Have you heard?"

The pigua. "Where?"

"Café Rimon. Seven dead."

"Oh my God." I skitter down the stairs to the courtyard, past the cemetery, through the gate. "When?"

"About twenty minutes after we left. I just found out."

Shelly. I glance at her handwriting on my wrist. Did she make it out in time?

"There are no names yet," Natalie says as if she can read my mind.

"I can't believe it. Twenty minutes?"

"I'm in Ein Kerem," she says. "I got in the car and drove here, then I realized I don't even know where you're staying."

"Park by the spring," I say. "I'll be there in a minute."

I race down the path. The sky over the valley has grown darker,

bruised blue, red and purple. The setting sun has sucked the warmth out of the air, and the mountain breeze feels cool on my skin, billowing out the back of my T-shirt as I run down the stairs to Hama'ayan Street.

Natalie is washing her hands in the drizzle of the spring, and then turns and sees me. "Oh, Lior." She grabs my hand—touches me—squeezes it with wet, cold fingers. Her eyes are pink. "We were just there."

"I know."

"I keep thinking, what if we'd stayed a bit longer?"

Street lights click on along the street, their warm beams offsetting the fading daylight's bluish tones. I look around. The neighbourhood appears new, sharper and clearer somehow, as if it had just rained.

"It was weird, like I suddenly felt I had to go," she says. "I just felt like it was time."

"I wanted to stay," I say. "I wanted to talk more."

"It was weird," she repeats.

"You saved me," I say, the words strange in my mouth, my hand—still in hers—breaking into a sweat.

"I didn't do anything," she says.

A car drives down the hill, its headlights blinding us, and Natalie squints and pulls her hand away. She has that swimming look in her eyes, before tears. I cross the street, stop and turn to Natalie. She hesitates but then follows. We walk down the path to the house, where we are hidden from the road, lower than the asphalt. We stand by the pomegranate tree. I don't invite her in.

"I'm sorry I came here." Her voice shakes; her shoulders quiver. "I didn't know where else to go."

"I'm glad you did," I say. I picture the patio in my head; summon

up the faces I memorized. "Remember the couple that was sitting next to us?"

"They spoke French," she says. "I was admiring her head scarf. I remember thinking it looked expensive. And there was that old guy . . ."

"With the fedora. By the door. He was writing."

"Oh no." She puts her hand over her mouth. "The mother with the stroller."

"She left right after you did."

"Thank God." Her eyes fill with tears. "It was so close today. One more coffee and we'd be dead. And instead of thinking how dangerous it would be to have a child in this place, like you said, it just makes me want one more." She cups her face with her palms and breaks into sobs.

I watch Natalie with my hands tightly curled inside my pockets, going against my instincts, which tell me to hold her, touch her, console her. But then she bows forward, as though she may fall, so I open my arms and catch her, and she buries her face in my chest, her tears soaking through my shirt. I stand there, stiff, my hands like slabs of dough on her shoulder blades, my head pulled back, looking up at the stars blinking between the clouds, at the valley, now dotted with flickering lights, and I'm not breathing her in, not wiping away her tears, not saying a word, just being a rock she can lean against. After a long while, her trembles subside and she sniffles into my chest, and we remain still, breathing. Her body hardens against me, so slowly that at first I think I must be imagining it, then her arms tighten around me, and she's clinging to me as though we're suspended over a cliff and I'm the one at the end of the rope. I can feel her breasts through her shirt, the heat from her body. My heart starts going double time;

my erection presses against the fabric of my jeans. "Natalie," I breathe out.

She pulls me down onto her and we fall, knees buckling, onto the earth, which smells sharp, warm, moist, like blood. She has a determined, focused look in her eyes as she scrambles to open the zipper of my pants, lifts her skirt and leads me inside her, her wetness and warmth, and it's like our bodies have memory, like they have never been apart. I try to kiss her but she moves her face and I kiss her neck, drink in her scent—body lotion and coffee and milk—and I remember: this is how love feels. So many times over the years I've pictured this, fantasized about it: her body beneath mine, her breath tangled in my breath. She clutches my shirt with her fists, whispers, "Deeper, deeper," and I move up and in, the way I know she likes, and she arches her back, and cries out when she comes, a quick sharp yelp, and I come too, collapsing onto her in tremors, and she's closing on me, holding me in, and it's a moment without doubt or question. There's a reason we didn't die in the pigua. Natalie is smiling, her cheeks glistening with tears. "Don't pull out yet," she whispers. "Stay." She squeezes me in. I feel her heartbeat against my chest, soft and fast like a fluttering bird.

When I finally pull out, I roll over and stretch out on the ground next to her. Through the pomegranate tree branches, the moon swims in and out of clouds. Natalie tilts her hips up and raises her legs, folds her knees into her arms like a fist. I turn on my side, lean on my palm and take all of her in, the curve of her hips, the line of her neck disappearing into her blouse. I'm feeling greedy. I want to follow that line; I want to touch her hair, those black ringlets starting to break free from her head scarf. I want to feel the skin of her breasts, take them in my mouth one last time. I want to

at least glimpse them. I slide my hand under her shirt, stroke her warm belly.

She puts a firm hand on mine and shakes her head no.

"I love you," I say.

She smiles like she's sad. "Aw, Lillosh," she says, using the nickname she'd given me. She gets up, buttons the top of her shirt, glides a hand over her skirt, tucks in strands of hair into her head scarf. I memorize her, etching her image into my brain. I know it's the last time I will see her. She bends down beside me and caresses the stubble on my cheek, tipping her head to look at me. "Thank you," she says.

I stay on the ground after she leaves, listening to the roar of her car fading away. I don't remember when the last time was that I lay on the earth, felt its pulse, the heat of the day emanating into my core. I dig into the soil with my nails, let the gritty roughness sift between my fingers. The night air is crisp and still, but my body is vibrating: warm, alive, as if I've been turned inside out. A long time passes and I feel I am becoming a part of this earth, this tree, this night. It feels a little bit like prayer.

SAY IT AGAIN, SAY SOMETHING ELSE

The day Lily meets Lana is her two-week anniversary in Israel. She's lying on her belly in the dried grass outside the apartment building she now calls home, watching insects through her macro lens. She's sweating in her faded blue jeans and Converse high-tops. Then a shadow eclipses her sun.

"You're new here," the girl says. "Where did you come from?"

Lily squints up. Ripped black stockings underneath an acid-washed jean miniskirt. A white sleeveless tank top. Blonde hair in a high ponytail. "Canada," Lily says.

"Cool. We moved here from Belarus two years ago. I'm Lana."

Lily looks up again, this time intrigued. She doesn't know where Belarus is.

"I live at entrance C. You live at B?"

Lily nods. She wonders if the girl is her age. If she'll be starting grade nine in the fall too, if she goes to the same school.