

Edna Shemesh

Amstel

Tully comes for lunch each Friday at one-thirty, as he has since his father died. And each Friday, as she has for so many years, she bakes him an almond-date loaf, fragrant with cinnamon and cloves, a crunchy cake that melts on the tongue and whose recipe she guards zealously. The oven beeps. She slides her right hand into the stiff oven mitt, bends over, draws out the aluminum baking pan, inserts a toothpick into the bulging loaf. Her nostrils widen – the aroma is wonderful – she replaces the cake on the oven rack and slams the door closed. She reduces the heat slightly, adds ten minutes for the cake to brown, become golden. By the time the oven beeps again she's washed the dishes and wiped down the counter of veined Hebron limestone with a damp cloth. She turns off the oven, sets the cake to cool on the round cutting board, then runs her hand distractedly over her apron, down her thigh, and when she sees the steam rising obstinately from the stovetop she turns to check the chicken cooking in brown sauce, gently shakes the pot so the meat won't burn, turns the chicken onto its side and bastes the browning pieces with the sauce in which they're simmering, then stirs the potatoes frying in the pan, scatters over them a little more red paprika and the garlic she crushed earlier and stirs again. And tastes. Not enough salt. She sprinkles a bit of salt, tastes again. Just right. She looks around, satisfied. Soon everything will be ready.

She reaches behind her back, unties the double knot, hangs the apron on the hook. Then she smooths her skirt with her hands, sits down in the chair between the kitchen and the dining nook, her back to the wall. Leon sends her a certain smile from the square, worn wooden frame on the opposite wall, fixing her with a Mona Lisa gaze that follows her like a faithful dog wherever she goes. She dismisses him with a wave of her hand and lights a cigarette. Shouts of children coming home from school intrude from the street, merging with the pale gray smoke which rises as she recalls those happy Fridays - so they seemed - when her Tully was still a little

boy. Memories quickly inundated her. She'd wake early in the morning with a diligence and resolution whose source she still can't fully identify, so early in order to cook and bake and clean and straighten and still manage to buy a sweet challah and bottles of seltzer and a newspaper at the corner market, and finish everything before Leon returns from work. Odors of the food cooking in her kitchen quickly filled all the rooms, then escaped to the street. As noon approached the bittersweet odor of cloves and cinnamon and honey from the cake baking in the oven suffused the air. Exactly at noon it filled with the peals of the bell rung faithfully by the custodian of the school across the street, adjacent to the empty, yellowing field. Immediately the street overflowed with the hubbub of clusters of running children bursting through the rusted metal gate, worn brown satchels bouncing on their backs, flooding the street, liberated. Then she'd wipe her hands on the towel, lean on the windowsill, with aching heart watch the sweaty creatures with unkempt hair, scan their faces and clothes, knowing she won't find her son among them. They ran, one after the other, laughing, exuberant, stopping suddenly, halted by an invisible hand, huddling, heads crowded together like a bunch of mops, exchanging colored marbles for creased trading cards or key rings, acting like experienced businessmen, then crouching in the dirt where a sidewalk would run one day, transfixed by a sudden nest of black ants or the concealed burrow trap of an ant lion. Suddenly the fabric of childhood appeared before her eyes. The red-cheeked objects of her gaze sharpened her sense that youth and adolescence had passed her by and she hurriedly cast it off. She never understood why Tully hadn't stayed outside to play with the other children, even for a little while. No matter how much she urged him, she always knew that ten minutes after the bell rang, the time it took to walk home from the school gate, her Tully will open the door, she'll hear a feeble "Hello, Mother," his nose leading him magically to the light on the stove, his face glowing with anticipated pleasure, and with a graceless smile he'd say, "Mother-you-know-Friday-I'm-hungrier-than-any-other-day?"

Every noon she looked at her son, amazed. The child who crossed her threshold was an exact replica of the one she'd sent off to school at seven-forty-five that morning: his shirt and pants spotless, the part in his hair exactly straight, his socks pulled up to mid-calf, his hangdog eyes.

She'd move back to the sink and he'd stand tensely at the stove, his heavy satchel on his back, "Nu, Mother, the smell is making me even hungrier, when will the cake be ready?" He'd watch her limbs move, the double knot of the strings of her colorful apron dividing her body in half, top and bottom, focusing on her practiced, energetic movements, her firm, determined steps, her all-knowingness, and his heart filled with a vague anxiety.

When the oven finally sounded its impatient beep Tully would turn it off under her watchful eye and observe her vigilantly as she held the towel, opened the metal door till it yawned wide and black, and then removed the swollen, golden cake. A satisfied smile lit both their faces; for a moment they shared an ambiguous camaraderie which they both found pleasant, until it faded. After she'd placed the bubbling cake pan on the wooden board resting on the counter he hurriedly pressed the warm towel to his heart, then, with her, examined the result, peering at every side with the serious, focused gaze he'd learned from her and said, "Mother, the cake is marvelous. I'm hungry." And she replied, as she always did: "First, take the satchel off your back. Did you finish the two sandwiches I put in your lunch bag today? You did? So why are you so hungry?" And added, annoyed: "Can't you see the cake is burning hot?" Quick, go wash your hands. Then, until the cake cools, eat some soup."

Tully, hands dripping, returned to the kitchen, peeked into the pot, steam clouded his glasses and he waited submissively for her reproach: "Tully, move away from the burners! You can't see anything like that, can't you see it's boiling? Here, I'll serve you soup, go, sit at the table," and pushed him back slightly. She removed a plate and glass from the cupboard; when she turned around he hadn't moved, she bumped into him, startled: He never does what I tell him, always gets in my way. Suddenly she felt the familiar, inexplicable malice swelling within her, which she always regretted later but never found the strength to overcome in time, and she yelled at him sharply until he, too, was frightened, trembled, his eyes filled with tears and her heart went out to him, but she didn't say what she wanted to say. Her voice came harshly from her throat: "Sit down at the table already! And if you didn't wash your hands with soap – you won't get even one crumb of the cake!" Then she wiped her hands and watched her son drag

his thin legs to the table, so skinny in spite of all her cooking and his frantic eating, his blue school uniform shirt slack on his frame, his shoulder bones protruding, his nape pale and thin.

She inhales the cigarette again. So, everything's ready. Tully will be here soon. She crosses her legs, which the years have been very kind to, and looks with satisfaction at the set table, but also with a certain disbelief: she never had a mother to teach her to cook, to manage a household, give her strength to bear a son, raise him, bravely endure widowhood, overcome the disaster and remarry. And lose him as well. And though she tries again, desperately, to repress the self-pity she begins to feel, she really and truly always had to do everything on her own, had no one to serve as an example or help her. Life taught her what she needed to know. And if she's so proud of herself, she thought bitterly, if she's so proud of herself why has that black hole been growing in her heart all these years, like a splash of ink spreading through water? She lit a new cigarette from the glowing butt she held between her fingers. And how could her Tully already be thirty years old, how the hell did time fly? Where did life go? And why did one thing not change – that Tully's still so terribly thin, like he was then, at ten, maybe even thinner, and except for the glasses and his height he looks just like her little Tully: bony, smart as a whip, with a wondrous appetite and irredeemably taciturn. A thirty-year-old boy fleeing the world, shuffling away like a cowed dog someone threw a slipper at. And still single and shy. And distant from her, shut up like a locked box of surprises, forbidding entry. She realizes the truth rising like a murky bubble which will eventually burst, but not before she admits it: two strangers, an ocean between them, especially since Mordy died. She looks repeatedly, distractedly at her small gold watch, smooths her hair, dyed coal-black, from her forehead back to the nape of her neck, with hands no longer young, their network of veins showing, their tight skin dotted with brown spots even though she'd been careful for years to protect them from this land's blazing sun. And perhaps her disappointment and her seeming clearheadedness are exaggerated, their power taking her by surprise, sharpening an old, guilty feeling always lying in wait like a cat crouched to spring: the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, Tully is her creation, hers and his father's, all their mistakes flowing into him, unavoidably,

like turbid water. And: how could I have harmed him so? But, instantly, she refuses to gauge the damage, simply accepts it.

She takes a last bitter, burning puff of the cigarette, allows the smoke to emerge from her nostrils like a dragon whose flames had been quenched. And her only son, whose heart is stone, has he known real love? And if he has, did it sear his heart? And if it hurt, how mortal was the pain? As usual when ruminations on her life and on Tully overcame her, she felt a hesitant spark of remorse, a tenderness her face never showed. And why not?

But that's really another, forgotten story. Now all they have left is lunch on Friday. Serve, cut, chew, swallow. Although, she admitted to herself, it's almost her only chance to eat a well-made, hot, nourishing meal instead of the leftovers she removes with disgust from the refrigerator and eats cold and tasteless, alone before the TV screen.

She reaches out to straighten the edge of the tablecloth on the laid table. The giant crystal vase glints at her from the center of the table, filled to the neck with clear water, awaiting the flowers Tully will hand her with a foolish grin when he arrives, as if buying them had been an inappropriate act which embarrassed him in a way she doesn't fully understand. But then it occurs to her that his discomfort is due to the role he unwillingly accepted, because that's what Mordy always did on Friday – came home from work with a huge bouquet of tall gladiolas wrapped in rustling cellophane. Mordy died. So did the corner florist whose shop closed long ago, and she wondered where her son now buys the beautiful tiger lilies he hands her so hesitantly before he seats himself at her table.

At one-thirty Tully rings the bell. The short ring gladdens but also annoys her. She imagines his thin finger at the bell, pressing the red button once, cautiously, who-knows-what awaiting him beyond the sealed door. Once, shortly before his bar-mitzvah, she showed him how to shake the guests' hands, a long, firm, energetic grasp. "Shake like a man," she scolded him. "What's wrong with you? Not like that. Right, like this. Like your grandfather shook hands." When she mentioned his grandfather, whom he never knew, Tully shrank into his collar like a frightened

snail, timidly shook her-hand-extended-as-example, limply. Why, she thought sadly, why had she never told him anything about his grandfather and grandmother, her mother and father, what she remembered, at least. But the few times she'd mentioned their names a white flood of misgiving spread between them, nor did she know which of them was more determined to avoid its threatening depths, he or she. Before she could find the answer her thoughts were diverted, a new memory suddenly arising from their labyrinth: Tully returning, tattered and breathing heavily, from an encounter with neighborhood children, covered in bruises, cowed, humiliated. She straightens his horn-rimmed glasses, tucks his shirt back into his pants and says, firmly: "Tully, just once! Just once take your glasses off, let Meir or Natan hold them, and hit them back! Yes, hit them back, you understand? If they punch you, punch them back. There's nothing to be afraid of! Just once, smack them – if not, they'll just hit you again!" But perhaps she only wanted to say it because Tully stood before her, looking down at his shoes, on the verge of the tears he'd later shed silently in his bed, alone, and she'd push him away with trembling fingers, concealing with difficulty the sour, burning feeling that rose within her. At herself. Not at him.

"Come in, Tully, it's open!" she calls to the closed door. His hand hesitates briefly on the knob, his brain unwillingly recognizes her rancor, realizes he's able to distinguish among her inflections, they're transparent to him, that throughout his life he's reacted to them like a snake hypnotized by its master's flute. The door opens wide and the-man-he-became stands in the doorway. He's tall like his father, his head oval as an ostrich egg, his face pale as its shell. His eyes are brown, like hers, but calm and gentle, lacking the fiery flares she's always seen in the mirror when her entire being rebels against her wasted life, the fact that no man ever read the flames glistening in her pupils, never dove into them. Except for Leon. But Leon never had any illusions and knew until the day he died he hadn't the power to free, even for a moment, the young girl trapped inside her from the memories of a life which had led her along paths she'd never once imagined she'd have to walk. And one day even Leon abandoned her. They knocked on the door, woke her up, said Leon had been killed accidentally during reserve duty by a gun that misfired. And after Leon fell – how vile she found that term, "fell," as if he could get up but

didn't – the flame she saw in the mirror grew into a black fire which horrified her, filled her with vengeance. But the fact even she won't deny is that she admitted Mordy to her widowhood only when she discovered he saw those flames. At the beginning she thought he entered her bed, then her soul, then finally brought his belongings and moved in with her only because of her body, her breasts and her hips, which were then, at her age, still desirable, and also, she had thought apprehensively, because of her money, the compensation she received from the army and the reparations from Germany, money she'd saved all those years. But she soon discovered Mordy had more money than he would be able to waste on both of them and that it was she he desired, her body, the depths of her pupils, of her being, and soon he learned to read her like an open book.

"Hello, Tully, come, sit down," she smiles at her son, but as he approaches she feels trepidation: his eyes are so sunken. His cheekbones are so prominent. His face is so pale. Could he have AIDS? She immediately rejects that possibility because her son, she laughs bitterly to herself, must certainly still be a virgin... She banishes the idea from her head lest a trace show on her face and notices, happily, the silk tie knotted at his neck, complementing perfectly the color of his shirt. Tully hands her the wine in a dark, slim-necked bottle.

"*"Masi"* wine," he tells her, "I hope you'll like it."

She lifts an eyebrow, wondering, "So where are the flowers this week?" because something had disrupted the ceremony to which she'd grown accustomed, and also because the crystal vase will remain empty and the table seem wider than usual.

"*"Masi,"* Tully? Thank you very much. "I've never had it."

She takes the bottle, reads the yellow label: "1996."

“Wonderful. We’ll drink it next time. It should be slightly cooler than when it comes out of your car, right?” She plants a firm thank-you kiss on his cheek, his response is cursory, a kiss she hardly feels, he apologizes for not having had time to buy flowers because he had an important meeting. Then he sits down in Mordy’s chair in the living room next to the glass wall facing the garden. She frowns. All week the chair sits empty, open-mouthed, stifling a scream, bereft of its owner. Since Mordy died she hadn’t dared sit in that chair, whose beautiful contours might still retain the impression of her dead husband’s body, his smell, his weight, his hands on the armrests; all that – even though it’s fading with time – will be erased forever by the impress of her son’s body. She looks at him, then at the chair, wringing her hands, surprised by his audacity, secretly proud of it. Tully isn’t aware of her distress, he sits upright, elbows on the faded armrests, looking through the glass wall, eyeing the bushes of white roses on the other side.

She leaves him there admiring her flowers and returns to the kitchen. She feels a weight on her chest. She lays the bottle of wine alongside three or four other bottles with delicate necks, filled with dark, blood-red liquid. When she returns to the living room Tully is sitting erect in his stepfather’s chair, gently rubbing his hands back and forth on the worn velvet armrests, as if their softness contained a message only he could read. “Smells good.” His nostrils widen, his stomach growls. She knows he’s hungry. As always. She pours two tall glasses of cold Coca-Cola, the dark liquid making the ice cubes tremble in the glass, whispering its way to the rim. When she strides vigorously toward him carrying the glasses on a tray he stops stroking the fabric.

“Here,” she says, “drink something.”

Tully thanks her but can’t avoid noticing how impatiently she sets food before him, as she’s done his entire life, for reasons he’d never really understood.

“Who’d you meet with today?;” she can’t restrain herself.

“Oh, some student from the Technion who wants to do an MA with us; nothing special.” He speaks to her with forced equanimity, or so she feels, as he lowers his nose into his glass.

“Do you want lemon?”

“No, no thanks. I’m OK.”

His mother is silent for a moment, brushes back a wayward gray curl from her forehead.

“What about the conference in Princeton? Are you going or not?”

She knows he’s sorry he ever mentioned the conference to her because she doesn’t stop poking her nose into the trip, twice a week at least, which is more or less the number of times she speaks with him from one Friday to the next. So, she thinks resentfully, let him fend me off elegantly, stick up for himself. It’s time he also learned to do that. And once again she feels burning within her the words whose meaning her life had taught her all too well: that life is so very short, that you’re not allowed to waste it, that you can’t correct your mistakes, that she feels his life is pointless and, she also wanted to say, she loves him more than anything else, but she doesn’t know how to tell him so.

“I told you already,” he replies calmly, Lior’s image appearing, rescuing him. “I don’t yet know whether I’m going to Princeton” and adds, without explaining, “I have some prior obligations.” And adds, to placate her, “There’ll be other conferences.”

Tully drinks deeply from the glass and looks at his mother with unexpected determination. Has some of the energy burning within her all these years flowed to him, disembodied yet forceful? She scratches her chin, sips her drink. Shrugs. Perhaps she exaggerates her effect on him.

Suddenly she smells something burning. She quickly places her glass on the table and hurries to the kitchen. She lifts the cover from the pot; a cloud of steam rises. She pulls back, stirs the contents of the pot, scrapes at the burned, charred potatoes with a spoon. "Everything's alright," she laughs in embarrassment to her son who followed her to the kitchen. "Today we'll have campfire potatoes, slightly burned." And added, unable to restrain herself, "Go wash your hands, Tully. We'll eat right away."

Tully grits his teeth, disappears into the bathroom. She places food on the plates, listens to him urinating at length, flushing the toilet, washing his hands. How delightful it seems to her: a man urinating in her house. Sounds of life from beyond the closed door. The bathroom door opens, Tully emerges. His head almost touches the top of the door frame.

She calls him to the table and, as he sits opposite her, her nostrils absorb the faint scent of her toilet soap adhering to his fingers. They eat silently. Everything she's wanted to tell him for years lies organized between her teeth along with the pieces of meat she's chewing, waiting for the right moment. Tully pours from the bottle of chilled white wine she set on the table, the yellowish stream flowing into the gleaming glasses. "*L'chaim, bon appétit*," she says, clinks their wineglasses gently, smiles at him from the depths of her heart. She tastes the wine, Tully cuts a square piece of meat, lifts it on his fork. She watches the meat's journey from his plate to his mouth. He pierces a slightly charred slice of potato with his fork, murmurs "Very good," and she knows he means it. Tully fills his mouth when he eats, his mother picks at her food. "You eat like a bird," Leon, his father, used to tell her mockingly, his cheeks bulging, swollen with the food he was chewing, looking like Louis Armstrong blowing a trumpet.

She rises, collects the plates, goes to bring dessert. "Tully, bring two dessert dishes from the bottom shelf of the breakfront," she calls over her shoulder. Tully removes two frosted glass bowls decorated with small milky flowers and places them carefully on the white tablecloth. His mother sets upright in each bowl a portly baked pear whose peels she'd removed strip by strip, leaving them crowned with their stems. She pours thick, fragrant red wine sauce over

and next to the pears, serves Tully his portion. Tully rubs his hands in enjoyment, says, "Wow, Mother, I really love this. So did Father, didn't he?"

"Yes," she admits but refuses actually to remember Leon.

"Your father loved to eat everything, and a lot," she tells him dryly. "No matter how much you put on his plate, he asked for more. The cholesterol finally gave him a heart attack!"

Tully's face crumples. Suddenly she realizes her mistake and her heart drops. Without thinking she confused his birth father, who was killed by a misfire, with the stepfather who loved him as if he'd been his own son and died one night in his sleep from a heart attack. Tully lost two fathers. He'd lost them both in an instant, as she'd lost her own parents and brothers. And sister. And uncles. And their wives. And children. And she wasn't even 16 years old. She's silent, embarrassed, doesn't know what to say to her son, especially now, when she feels the fading fine, strong, silk-like strands reaching out to him, thickening into loveless bonds of guilt. Tully is silent, a slight, painfully-familiar tremor disturbs the corner of his mouth and a fine wrinkle, also an old acquaintance, furrows the skin above his nose near his right eyebrow. He delicately chews the last slice of pear. She collects herself. "Tully, I'm sorry, for a moment I was confused, it's strange, he..."

Tully swallowed. "Father didn't die because of what he ate," he grumbled, as if she didn't know.

"I'm sorry, Tully, it was really stupid of me to say that."

"His cholesterol was genetic," Tully adds, eyes glaring, "but a five millimeter bullet does a more thorough job than a blood test."

“Don’t be so cynical.” She forces a smile, seeks a way out: “When was the last time you had a blood test?” Again she’s mixed them up.

“Mother, enough,” he stops her, wearily, “I’ve been taking *Simovil* for two years, but that’s different.

And how could she have discovered this only now? What else doesn’t she know about him? Actually, what *does* she really know about him? She stabs the sugared pear slice in her bowl with her fork until it falls, and looks carefully at Tully’s face. It reveals nothing. She’s lost him forever.

Later the air fills with the aroma of brewing coffee. Tully will finish his cup of bitter coffee, sit with her a little longer, continue on his way. Conversation doesn’t flow between them today. His father imposes himself, his large body filling the room. She hands Tully the coffee cup and, to lighten the atmosphere, asks, “Do you know who’s getting married next week?”

“No, who?” he asks, holding the cup in one hand, the saucer in the other.

“Adi. Do you want to come to her wedding?”

He shrugs, his lips hastily recoiling from the hot coffee. “I haven’t seen her, I think, for about ten years - but maybe. Were you invited?”

“Yes,” she nods. “The wedding will be in some little restaurant, nothing elaborate, just a saxophone and a piano.”

That’s when she has the idea. They drink silently, he nibbles a second slice of her almond-date cake with obvious pleasure, she lights a cigarette, coughs slightly, and the more she thinks

about her idea the more attractive it seems, she's becoming excited, feels she's had enough, pushes her cup away and says to him: "Tully, next week, instead of lunch, I want to invite you in the evening to a café bar. How about it?"

He looks at her suspiciously before responding, to see what she's planning, and when she looks down asks: "Where, exactly, would you like to go?"

"What difference does it make," she says, trying to contain her enthusiasm, "though I know a nice place next to the sea, they play jazz, you like jazz, right? So take your mother out for once. Anyway, they have good beer and unusual cocktails." She laughs mischievously, leans her head back and her laugh conceals momentarily the folds in her chin. Her eyes sparkle. She fingers the short pearl necklace she's wearing, uncrosses her legs.

"Do you think your mother stays home all the time? She doesn't."

"Why a bar?"

"Why not? Don't worry, no one will think I'm with some young gigolo; we look too much alike," she laughs again, adding: "My treat. And I promise to take you straight home if you get drunk..."

Tully loosens his striped tie, opens the top button of his shirt.

"I don't think so, Mother."

"What, that you'll get drunk? No, no, I'm just kidding. But I won't take no for an answer, not this time."

After he gave in to her, he left. And after he'd gone, and the oppressive silence descended again, restoring her loneliness, she shook the tablecloth over the sink, placed the dishes in the dishwasher and wiped the counter with the towel, aware of the oppressive silence and her own distress mixed with the noise of cars driving along the street. When she finished straightening up the kitchen she went to the large bedroom she'd shared with Mordy, first moving aside the curtain and opening wide the hinged windows. Light burst into the room, blinding her, but not before she noticed Nils Holgersson's tiny form in a corner of the sky, grasping the goose's feathers, descending and then swooping up again into the blue, heading home. She sat before the mirror at her dressing table. The sun's rays sharpened the contours of her reflection. Her wrinkles mocked her. She ignored them, her heart insisting to the image reflected in the mirror, *Next Friday I want to see you really drinking, sweating, smoking, dancing, spinning, laughing drunkenly, and I want to see him sweating, drinking, dancing, spinning, laughing with all his heart, and I promise to hold myself back, not be tempted to bring Betty to him from the hotel across the street from the bar...* When she thought of Betty, her face fell. She removed a small cotton ball from a clear plastic container, dipped it in a milky cream and cleaned her face religiously. Tully is my punishment, or I'm his, she thought. She passed her extended fingers over the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, over the deep furrows etched on her upper lip, over her worn face, time's faded playground – time, which had ruined it before she had exhausted its potential. Suddenly-though-not-really she felt very weary, her body utterly exhausted. She rested her head against the mirror whose response was appropriately chilly.

The days slipped by the following week on tip-toe, one after the other, like lovers returning to their wives. Summer was at its height. The days were lovely, clear. She took long walks along the shore dotted with sunshades, watched, strangely apprehensive, the white sailboats floating toward the horizon and didn't understand why they filled her with uncertainty. Nevertheless, all the ordinary sights she saw compensated for that feeling, filled her with a peace which had nothing to do with people: she contentedly tracked little sparrows fluttering to drink from a dripping faucet in the small courtyard of an apartment building, her eyes caressed the Bauhaus

arches of the lovely old buildings and she even imagined she could hear the swollen bellies of watermelons in the booths down the street bursting like abscesses soon-to-be-healed.

Her body was strong despite her years, her legs carried her wherever she wished to go. When she didn't succumb to heartache and rejected her mirror's verdict life seemed to be smiling on her, graciously accepting her gratitude. And then, full of renewed vitality, she donned a wide-brimmed straw hat, hid behind her black sunglasses from the blinding light and took long walks along the seashore. Thursday afternoon she went downtown and bought, without hesitation, a tight little-black-dress, ignoring the saleswoman's dubious expression. As she walked along the crowded city streets carrying a clear plastic shopping bag her loneliness faded, but most of all she looked forward to the coming Friday.

The following evening, when Tully arrived at ten-thirty, she was ready. She looked him over, complimented him on his pinkish shirt tucked neatly into his white trousers. He looked with amazement at the black dress hugging her figure, the patent-leather belt around her waist, her black hair piled up on her head, her lips marked by a bright red line. He forced a smile. "You look good, Mother." She took his arm, ready to leave; he, embarrassed, sorely regretted he'd agreed to this folly. "Come, let's go down," she urged, fearing he might change his mind, turn, leave.

When they reached the bar a bald young waiter dressed in black led them to a side table opposite a big glass wall. Bright lights beyond illuminated the dark water. They sat next to each other facing the sea. They heard Bessie Smith's rich, rough voice from a hidden loudspeaker. The bar was still half empty but already shrouded in cigarette smoke. A small, bare stage with a black piano rose to their left.

"The show starts soon," his mother said and lit a cigarette. Tully grimaced but she ignored him. A different waiter, sharp-featured, a long, black apron tied to his waist, approached them, placed two drinks menus before them, then drew a plastic cigarette lighter from his pocket and

lit the small white candle in the glass globe on their table. The flame brought it back to life, its flickering eye inspecting them inquisitively: the man sat sallow-faced, quickly scanning his menu's small print. The woman carefully read the ridiculous names of the cocktails on the list in front of her. "If you don't mind, Tully – uh – I'll have a "Red Orgasm," she decided. And giggled in embarrassment, "What will you have?"

"Nothing yet."

Tully's fingers played with a pointed toothpick until her cocktail arrived, Bessie Smith's rasping voice still wrapping him in a thin, fragile, protective layer. The waiter returned to their table, set before his mother a tall glass topped with two colorful paper parasols and a dish of salted almonds. The drink in her glass shimmered at them in three shades of red: pale as rose-water at the bottom, red as her lipstick in the center, a blood-red layer which suddenly disgusted him at the top. She drank deeply, holding the large glass in her hand, her nails unsheathed, her veins entwined like a grapevine.

"Are you having a good time, Tully?" she asked, her eyes half-closed. Tully listened attentively to the jazz singer and nodded to his mother.

"No," she furrowed her brow, "Not because of the marvelous jazz, which I know you're enjoying. Your life, I'm asking. Are you enjoying life?" She stirred the drink in her glass, the liquid swirled momentarily before turning muddily crimson. Tully swallowed. Then he breathed deeply because Bessie Smith had just been turned off and a man, not so young, wearing tight jeans and a black shirt, sat down at the piano. He gazed at the crowd murmuring at the tables, appraised it, settled himself comfortably and without a word laid his hands on the keyboard and began playing quickly. When the brief piece ended his mother clapped enthusiastically. Softer applause could be heard from people seated nearby. The pianist smiled forgivingly, nodded slightly in acknowledgement. He played the next piece also without saying a word. Good old Dave Brubeck, Tully said to himself with satisfaction and concentrated on the

rhythms sounding from the echoing black cabinet. As he listened Lior slipped back into his thoughts, drenched in the hot shower, his skin gleaming in the water flowing over him, leaning his head back, eyes closed, the water streaming through his hair, cascading along his body, whispering down like writhing sea snakes, the piano's sounds melting in his ears like silky ice cream.

He's enjoying the music so much, exulted his mother silently. "I wonder what he's playing now," she said to Tully, and Lior's image vanished. She waved to the waiter.

"Do you have Amstel? You do? Bring us two," she ordered.

Tully objected. "Mother, I think you've had enough to drink," but she replied that if he doesn't want his beer she'll be happy to drink it for him and stared at him, her eyes glistening.

"I'm allowed to," she said, her words sounding wearily, heavy as lead. "I turned eighteen yesterday afternoon..."

Just as the pianist announced an intermission their beers arrived. She opens the pack of cigarettes and removes another. The round ashtray beside her is filled with crushed, wormy butts with a foul odor, their ends stained red with lipstick. She brings the cigarette in her mouth to the candle burning in the glass globe, its tip hisses and reddens from the scorching flame and she inhales the pale smoke deeply. Tully notices that fraction of a moment in which her lips pucker like a sphincter, her face lit from below by an alien, yellow light, a double flame burning in her pupils, her gaze fixed on the tiny flare as if reading the future. She draws bitter smoke into her lungs, lifts veiled eyes to her son. The drink that has gone to her head and the dance music coming from hidden loudspeakers lift her spirits in a way she never expected. She's flooded with joy, all the jagged pieces of her life's mosaic fall into place thanks to a miraculous grace. Suddenly she's beautiful, and featherlight, and the lens through which everything had seemed blurred all her life abruptly focused. Now she's able, if only for a

moment, to become that girl who wilted inside her even before she'd blossomed. She looks longingly at the couples moving slowly across the small dance floor next to the piano, pressed against each other. She taps her foot under the table in time with the rhythm, imagines Tully pulling her to him and dancing with her awkwardly until Mordy taps him on the shoulder and asks with a smile, "May I?" And his round but mobile body clings to her and Mordy holds her arm confidently and guides them both to the center of the dance floor, leads with measured steps, spins her again and again, until her heart pounds and, still dizzy in his arms, wreathed in smoke and the hoarse sounds of a gilded saxophone, she's unable to keep a feeling of immeasurable sadness from stealing into her heart, sketching Leon's face in its empty chambers. Her sense of ease vanishes as quickly as it came. As does her good mood. She rests her elbows on the table and stares at the empty beer glass. Nothing of the foaming, yellow drink remains. With an effort she looks at the dark sea on the other side of the glass wall, watches it beat angrily against the shore, again and again, until she begins to feel that peace which appears on a person's face when the line on the monitor's display flattens, lengthens, accompanied by single, long monotonous tone, a final chord whose significance is clear.

The dancers tired and returned to their tables. The piano player returned holding a half-full glass of red wine. He lifted it to the audience, drank deeply, made a clicking sound with his tongue and declared, as he rested the glass on the top of the piano, "I'm now going to play something I like very much." Tully watched his fingers galloping over the keys. His mother, her face sagging, nodded her head in time to the music and didn't stop drinking. The black-clad waiter approached their table and politely asked whether everything was alright. Tully dismissed him angrily and looked at his watch. It was almost midnight. A good time to sober up.

"You're already completely drunk," he said to his mother grimly and took her flabby arm. "I suggest we pay and leave."

"No, no, what do you mean," she objects and pulls her arm away. "I'm not drunk and the night is still young, as they say," she laughs, then grows serious and says, sobering, "But I want to ask you something, Tully. Is there anything in your life you regret doing, or not doing? Because I do, many things. This, for example. Listen: I was thirteen years old, in a youth movement, what a great time we had! Like you could have had if you'd listened to me and joined the Scouts! Anyway, one day Peter, our group leader, brought us to the forest. We walked along trails past nettles and wildflowers until we reached a ruined structure in the middle of the forest. It had an external staircase that was almost completely demolished and a balcony above which no longer had a railing. Peter removed a sheet of canvas from his large knapsack," she belched, then continued, "spread it on the ground and told everyone to hold it fast, each of us would have to climb to the porch and jump down to the canvas. *Everyone* did it. Some children wanted to go again. When my turn came I climbed the stairs with trembling knees. I stood up there and barely dared look down. The children stood in a circle holding the canvas tight. They roared at me: "Jump, jump, you can do it!" You can't imagine how much I wanted to jump. Even now I see myself standing at the edge, my head spinning, mouth dry, heart pounding..." She took a long drink from the second glass of beer and continued with eyes closed, "I heard all the shouting around me. Peter stood on the side, hands on his hips, and also shouted: 'Jump! What are you waiting for? You can do it! Like everyone else!' But I wasn't like everyone else, Tully. I was never like everyone else! The children screamed and screamed until my fear made them look hazy and I was covered in sweat. Finally, they'd had enough. They dropped the canvas sheet and went off to play. Peter climbed up and found me paralyzed by fear. He held my hand and carefully led me down the stairs. No one scorned me that day more than I did myself. And..." His mother fell silent, her train of thought suddenly snipped by sharp scissors, and opened her eyes. Tully watched her intently.

"And what?", he asked, curious.

But she simply rested her cheek on her right hand and closed her eyes again. A long, deep belch came from her throat. Tully glanced to both sides, as if apologizing, but no one was paying any attention to him or to the elderly woman beside him.

“Mother, come, let’s go,” he asked, “You’re completely drunk.”

“No!” Again she pushes him away. “I have to know: When someone sets you up high, do you jump? Do you jump?” And added, not waiting for an answer, suddenly remembering something important: “And I still have to get you Betty, who’s been working for at least twenty years, if not more, in the hotel across the street,” and she rummages in her purse, removes her cellphone and begins pressing the buttons.

“Mother, you’re not serious!,” he raises his voice. “Have you gone mad?”

“Don’t look at me like that! Betty’s a first-class whore! Your father was a regular customer at least once a week for many years! You can too, maybe you’ll finally lose your virginity!” She laughs in his face maliciously, with pleasure, and when she’s realized what she’s said she hurriedly covers her mouth with her hand to silence it, but the words have already slipped out.

“Tully, please don’t listen to what your mother says,” she asks in a weary tone, “I no longer know what I’m saying.”

“But is it true?” he presses.

“Let’s go home; maybe I really did have too much to drink.”

“Who are you talking about?”; he’s relentless, “About Dad or Mordy?”

His mother, with an effort, swallows her rising nausea and stops the tears that quickly follow and nods her head. "I'm talking about your father, of course about your father! All those years, when you gazed at him as if he were a bastion of strength, your father went to that whore. I saw them first by chance, standing at the hotel entrance, hugging like old friends. She was already fatter than me and hadn't even an ounce of charm. Once, when he came home in the middle of the night and I assaulted him with questions he didn't even bother to deny it. I was young and attractive, and your father fell in love with a wrinkled whore! All those years, he refused to give her up! She even came to his funeral, can you imagine that! After he was killed in the army they turned him into a 'big hero,' an 'exemplary family man,' a 'reliable employee,' but the truth is that your father," she sniffs, sniffs again, "was a real shit, if you'll excuse the expression! A real shit!"

And she suddenly laughs bitterly, a laugh that bubbles over like the white foam on the lips of a rabid dog: "That's the reason you have no siblings, Tully. I refused to go to bed with him ever again, until he died!"

Tully shifts uncomfortably on his chair and clenches his jaws. The sounds of the piano bounce off him like rays of light on a white wall and no longer penetrate. Why is she telling him all this? Did she plan ahead of time to bring him here to share her secrets? To hurt him like that, to spit on his father, or are only the cocktail and the Amstel speaking? Still, he feels a certain sympathy for his mother flooding him and he lays his palm on her arm. Her worn skin feels wrinkled and cold and Tully draws back his hand. And when he connects his father's betrayal to her frequent reproaches, the malevolence with which she always treated him, the bitterness that corroded his childhood, his short-lived sympathy vanishes along with all his compassion.

Tully looks at his mother, his heart torn. What does he really know about love? The picture that comes to him is old but sharp as a razor: a hot summer day, flooded with light. One of many. He's sitting in the empty courtyard, his back leaning against the trunk of that chinaberry tree in whose crevice he'd feverishly hidden an endless number of secret notes to one fair-

haired girl. He's sitting by himself, chewing the slightly sour edges of the pinkish orchid tree blossoms that numb his tongue and leave a faint odor in his nostrils. All the other children have already gone home. He stayed in his favorite corner to think. He thought and thought until he suddenly noticed a large spider gently holding its young with two of its front legs, rocking it rhythmically. He was thrilled by the sight, bent his head closer and saw the spider carefully, compassionately wrapping the tiny form in thin filaments, turning and wrapping it again and again, lovingly. He kept watching, very interested, until suddenly, all at once, the truth hit him: it isn't love he's seeing, but a predator and prey! And not a cradled baby but a stupid fly or unlucky bug that had been lured to the tent opening, unwittingly touched the sticky threads, was trapped by them, and immediately caught, stung, paralyzed by poison and wrapped, helpless and near death, in a thin, merciless shroud... Tully felt suffocated. He stood, panicked, broke off a small, sticky branch from an oleander bush drooping over the low fence, hit the spider hard until it released its prey and, with one amazing leap, fled. He gently held the fly trapped in the sticky threads and tried to free its wings. To his horror, as soon as he touched the paralyzed body it crumbled like a mummy whose shroud had been unwrapped. Tully ran to the spider nest, destroyed it with a wave of his hand and didn't calm down until he found the leaping spider and crushed it with the heel of his sandal. And since then, all his life, he was no longer bound by untested assumptions – he investigated them, leaving no stone unturned. And he never makes another mistake or sees love instead of a trap for fools. And he was always on guard.

"Enough," he tells his mother firmly, "I'm paying and taking you home."

He signals to the waiter and requests the check with an impatient gesture. And until it arrives his mother continues to object vigorously and refuses to end the evening. Tully takes out his wallet and pays the bill, leaves a twenty shekel note on the saucer and quickly stands without waiting for change.

"Tully, would you like to dance?" his mother asks hoarsely, extending her hand. Tully finally loses patience.

"Stay if you want," he tells his mother with a scathing glance. "I'm leaving."

"OK, OK," she stands, wobbles, and pushes her chair back. And as they leave the bar words fall from her mouth like a string of rotten teeth:

"So-am-I-taking-you-to-Betty-the-fat-whore-across-the-street-yes-or-no?"

Her son steadies her against his shoulder and takes a deep breath. The summer night air is muggy and oppressive. They cross the parking lot, his hand on the back of her neck, ready to support her the moment she stumbles. As they pass the cheap hotel its name winks at him in colored neon lights and his mother suddenly spits once right at its dingy door: "Bitch!" And when they reach the car Tully eases her limp form into the back seat, her head falling on the cushion. He buckles her seatbelt despite her objections and drives her home quickly and implacably. The entire time, her head leaning against the backrest and her eyes closed, she stuffs words into his head like someone putting coins into a piggy-bank. At first she mumbles illogical, incomplete sentences, fragments of thoughts, broken, confused words, mixed with short bursts of laughter almost like weeping, as drunks do, and when he's tired of hearing her voice he turns on the radio and seals himself off. Suddenly she calms and grows silent and when he thinks she's fallen asleep he's alarmed to discover it's only the calm before the storm because she straightens up abruptly and begins talking quickly, waving her hands urgently, speaking in a mix of Hebrew and her mother tongue and he becomes aware of names, names of people and names of places, components of worlds which had comprised the mosaic of her life that she's now dismantling behind his back for the first time in his life. The words begin to form sentences, the sentences become paragraphs, the paragraphs become that entire fractured episode in her life. And as she speaks on and on about that year, that terrible year, from '43 to '44, forever, the words stick to him like leeches or a second skin and he knows that now, in her

drunkenness, she's breaking the vow of silence she's kept for so many years about what happened that year, what had been etched in her flesh and in her heart and left their caustic impression on his life also. He'd longed his entire life for her to speak. Had she only known how much he'd needed, all his life, one image, clear and focused, of that indistinct mother who'd shadowed his childhood. Had she known she might have gotten drunk and opened the window to her terror years ago. Tully turned the wheel sharply, drove into a deserted street and turned the engine off. Even drunk her voice was clear and lucid. Slowly the fragile, cracked layer on which his life rested and ~~on~~ over which he'd walked as if on a tightrope came finally into view. He listened to what her voice was telling him, its tone rising and falling, until he surrendered, responded to her mute plea and her-little-Tully detached himself and went to sit beside her. She hugged her little boy's bony shoulder and rested her cheek on his head. For an instant the spider on the chinaberry tree again tempted the boy who watched it longingly to believe it was wrapping its young in filaments of love. His mother gently brushed his fair hair with a kiss and opened an old photograph album for both to see. She moved her fingers gently over a rectangular, black-and-white picture from which a thin, tall girl wearing a pair of tiny pearl earrings was staring, looking directly at the photographer, a thick, blonde braid down her shoulder, her chin resting on the belly of a violin and her hand confidently holding the bow raised above it. His mother turned the rustling pages one by one and showed him, one after the other, the dead souls of her life: unsmiling men with mustaches and felt hats also looking intently at the camera, four merry women wearing tight skirts and jaunty hats, smiling, walking arm-in-arm through a broad plaza in whose center stood a bronze statue of a mounted knight, children in sailor suits standing on a stone balcony, flowers blooming in pots on either side, girls wearing embroidered dresses and aprons seated on large bales of hay, toddlers in a photo studio wearing holiday attire standing beside a huge toy elephant, fear of the photographer or perhaps of the elephant in their wide eyes, distant vistas of turrets and towers and ancient stone buildings and broad rivers crossed by stone bridges with lovely railings, and more and more vivid black-and-white photographs. Finally his mother closed the cover of the crackling album, which evaporated into thin air. Then the spell also faded. There was perfect silence in the car. The words that had escaped her lips disappeared like black bats, like puffs of smoke,

spewed violently and painfully into him until he wanted to seal himself against their horror and their weight, until the words collapsed within her and she immediately fell asleep in the back seat, her hands resting on her bosom, her upswept hairdo disheveled, peaceful snores emerging intermittently from her open mouth. Tully didn't move. Perhaps he sat there for a minute, perhaps for an hour, perhaps for an entire portion of his life, his hands gripping the steering wheel. Suddenly he recovered and started the car.

The tall mirror in the elevator reflected Tully's anguished expression. He scratched his chin and waited for the door to open. When he reached the fifth floor he removed a small key from the pocket of his trousers and held it firmly. The hallway was quiet. Faint laughter came from a nearby apartment. He entered his apartment and quietly locked the door, trying very hard not to cause a disturbance. Lior had turned on the lamp with the rice paper shade and the corner where it stood was bathed in a yellow glow. The computer sitting on the desk on the side wall under the wide window facing the sea murmured quietly. Tully tapped a key at random, brought the computer back to life, ordered it to shut down and the eye that had suddenly opened closed immediately without a sound. Tully turned out the light also in the living room and felt his way to the kitchen. He opened the door of the refrigerator and by its faint gleam poured himself a glass of milk. His head hurt. He hadn't eaten or drunk anything all evening. He leaned against the white wall, recalling what happened before the night ended: her body leaning against his, stiff and heavy, on the way from the car to the elevator; his mother bending and suddenly vomiting as they ascend to the second floor; the white stain, which smells awful, spreading over his shirtsleeve, just before she bent again and dirtied the tips of his shoes with a foul fluid, both of them avoiding the turbid puddle, "Leave it, Mother, I'll clean it up"... Opens the door, walks to the bathroom, helps her wash and dry her face, then lays her on her bed in her clothes. And when he covered her with the thin blanket she grasped him by the neck, a sour odor came from her mouth, and she said, with eyes closed, "Mordy, are you coming to bed?"

He tries ineffectively to erase the image of her alcohol-soaked slack body, the journey her drunken words had revealed to him, her black hair whose visible white roots were undeniable, her throbbing throat curved on the pillow like a goose with a broken neck and her limp breasts suddenly exposed, to his great embarrassment, a moment before he turned his head, before he covered her and turned off the light and drove home, the Aladdin's-lamp hanging from his belt plugged tightly, the demon trapped deep within banging on its walls like a madman.

Tully was no longer able to ignore his hunger pangs and quickly ate a cold piece of chicken he found in the refrigerator and drank the rest of the milk in his glass. When he placed it in the sink it slipped from his grasp, hit the porcelain and a single, sharp sound accompanied the impact and a long, remarkably symmetrical crack appeared. A light went on. Lior's voice came from the next room, sleepy and startled.

"Tal, is that you? What time is it?", and was briefly silent and then murmured: "What – you were with your mother until now?"

"Shh...go back to sleep, Lior," Tal whispered in return, "I'll be right in."

He removed the glass from the sink and it split into two large pieces, as if the crack had been inscribed in it from the day it was created and had waited for this moment to assert itself. He sucked the blood that spurted from his palm, then pressed firmly on the wound, carefully collected the fragments and threw them into the garbage can. The cut still bled as he walked to the bedroom. Lior lay on his side, wrapped in the blanket, and when he saw the tall shadow on the wall cast by the faint light from the window he turned on the light and rubbed his eyes. Tal sat on the edge of the bed.

"How was it," he asked, "As bad as you expected?"

Tal shrugged his shoulders, stood and began to undress. He freed from his trousers the shirt whose sleeve was stained with vomit, careful to avoid staining it with his blood. He pulled his arms from the sleeves without unbuttoning, as if liberating himself from a straightjacket. "She got drunk," he explained.

"And then?"

"Nothing. But I have something amusing to tell you, and don't ask me why I remember it in the middle of the night."

He undid his trousers, which slid to the floor, then sat down again next to Lior in his underwear and socks, his thin back bent. Lior watched him silently. The vertical crease that always appeared on Tully's forehead when he was unhappy was very familiar; so was his sagging back as he sat, miserable, thoughts flooding his head so quickly he seemed to be drowning in deep water, desperate for a lifeline, never asking for one. Lior threw off the blanket and sat beside him on the bed.

"I'm listening," he said.

"OK, listen: we once lived in an old building, on the second floor. One day I tried an experiment. I cut up a silk scarf that I took from my mother's drawer to make a parachute and attached it with threads to a toy soldier. Then I sat at the edge of the balcony, released the paratrooper and jumped at the same time."

Lior looked at him, amused. "And why did you do such a daring thing?"

"I wanted to see who'd reach the ground first."

"And who did?"

"I did," Tal laughed. "I did, of course."

"And nothing happened to you?"

"Not to me."

"And to the paratrooper?" Lior began to laugh.

"The paratrooper? He wasn't as lucky. The threads of his parachute got tangled in a branch of a thorn bush and he broke his neck. I found him hanging upside down, between heaven and earth. And my mother – she's still searching for her silk scarf..."

"Are you coming to bed?" Lior whispered to Tal and slipped beneath the sheet which had already grown cold. He raised his hips, slid down his briefs. Tal sat up. Lior smiled, his eyes shining, every part of him exposed. Tal ran a finger along his back. Lior's pubic hairs were as pale as the hair on his head, he thought, pale and soft. He bent down and with his palm caressed Lior's flat belly, his swelling member. The cut in his hand was painful. He stroked Lior again and again. Then he removed his briefs and remained in his socks, bony, gangling, Tully. Lior grasped his neck and pulled him closer. The lamplight fell on them both. Focused and direct, casting two entwined shadows on the white wall. Beyond the open window, not far away, the sea launched its waves at the shore repeatedly. Rhythmically, faintly, the billows broke over the greenish rocks, their wrath constrained. Tiny ripples calmly slipped past the surging breakers, retreating and returning again and again to lap the grains of sand, watching with mounting envy the tempestuous water nymphs who angrily, powerfully discharge their frothy burden, strengthening in the rising wind.

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