

Maya Arad

“The Hebrew Teacher”

Translated by Jessica Cohen

1.

“It wasn’t a very good time for Hebrew.”

She finished typing the words that had been scurrying around in her mind for weeks. She looked at them but she was dissatisfied. Was that right? Was that how you said it?

She tried again: “It was not a very good time for Hebrew.” Now she was confused and couldn’t make up her mind. Which was better? More correct? She’d been living here for almost forty-five years and still could not write a simple sentence in English.

She settled on “It wasn’t a very good time for Hebrew,” but then she stopped writing and shut down the computer. Either way, it was not a good time for Hebrew. When she’d arrived, in ’71, it had been a good time for Hebrew. She would tell people she was from Israel and they would give her admiring looks. The Six-Day War was still fresh in people’s minds. Even the War of Independence still lived on in the adults’ memories. And the Yom Kippur War two years later brought another wave of support. Her classes at the synagogue were packed. Parents wanted their children to be able to chat in Hebrew, not just recite the prayers. There was demand for an adult class, too. Everyone wanted to know a few words before they visited Israel. They wanted to learn the new songs. She remembers singing to them, accompanying herself on the guitar: *Od tireh, od tireh – You will yet see, how good it will be, next year...* They sang along with her, hesitating a little on the verses but joining in for the chorus. At the Jewish day school they begged her to give them a few hours, and within a year she was teaching full-time. Bruce arrived on campus in ’75, and after hearing her praises sung in every possible corner, he asked her to teach a beginners Hebrew class at the university.

But now was not a good time for Hebrew. Enrollment had been declining for almost two decades, and had dropped even further in the past three years. Fewer and fewer Jewish students were coming, and those who did were not always interested in learning Hebrew. The situation in Israel wasn’t helping, of course. Israel is a tough sell these days. It’s not the fledgling little country of forty-five years ago. Nor is Ilana the same beaming young woman who arrived, thick copper braid over one shoulder, to regale the riveted students with stories about hiking from sea to sea, working on the kibbutz, and firing an Uzi when she served in the Israel Defense Forces. They gazed at her reverentially when she told them: I was born along with the state! There was

boundless pride back then. Pride in the state, pride in herself. Both so young, yet already with such great achievements!

She held up a silver-framed photograph she'd received as a gift from her students: the first graduating Hebrew class at this college. She was still in touch with some of them. Forty years had gone by, and she remembered each and every one: Allen and Sheila, Rachel and Abbie, David and Dave... And who was that? Oh yes, Tovi. She'd had her little sister, too. Ruth. She recognized them all, she thought, smiling to herself as she looked at the group huddled around her, trying to get closer. She was in the middle, radiant, wearing an embroidered blouse and old-fashioned Israeli sandals, looking the same age as them. She can scarcely recognize herself.

When she looks in the mirror in the women's bathroom, a moment before the first class of the school year, she sees short-cropped, tousled hair, more gray than brown. No trace of copper. Her face is pale and slightly ashen. Gone are the red apple cheeks, which she hated so much because they made her look babyish. Her lips are thin, pursed. She wears glasses, and her eyes look so small behind them. The brows are practically gone. Night and day between her and the young girl in the embroidered blouse. Night and day between that young country and today's Israel. Back then, in the good years, she organized a big event for Independence Day every year. Israel's birthday. And hers. There were always colorful poster-boards that her students helped make, with pictures and captions: cutting-edge agriculture, information technology, unique medical patents, aid to the third world... There were always volunteers to blow up blue-and-white balloons and hang little flags. They'd buy falafel and humus from the Lebanese restaurant in the next town, and she'd stop by the Jordanian's grocery store for *Bamba* and *Bissli* and other Israeli junk food. They'd set up a table laden with treats on the quad. She would bring the clunky old tape recorder and all her cassettes of beautiful Israeli folk songs: Arik Einstein, Hava Alberstein, Ilanit. In the good years, the Israeli emissary to the campus "Hillel" even arranged for a camel—God knows how. They came from all over campus to see. There were always students who volunteered to staff the table from noon until evening. Everyone who walked by would stop, read the signs, grab a handful of *Bamba* or a candy bar. Even the ones who didn't stop waved hello. And there was always a little article in the college newspaper, with a picture of the camel decorated with blue-and-white ribbons.

She hesitated for a moment, then pulled out a tube of subtle brown lipstick and applied it. In a few moments she would walk into her classroom. How many times had she taught Hebrew to

beginners? At least forty. How many more times would she do it? However many were needed, she answered herself, and put the lipstick back in her purse. She had no replacement. Who could teach Hebrew here, if not her? True, every so often she had some help. The wife of an Israeli grad student who was happy for the part-time work, or a teacher from the Jewish day school looking for extra hours. But everyone knew: Ilana was Hebrew at this college. Without her there was nothing. So many ups and downs she'd been through here. So many changes she'd survived. Transferred from the Language Center to the Center for Jewish Studies, and then to the Middle Eastern Studies Program, to which Jewish Studies had been annexed more than a decade ago. Bruce was still the Center's director at the time. He took care of her, made sure her status was unharmed. "What are you worried about, *maideleh*?" he laughed – he still called her that, even though she was in her fifties – "They can't get along without you. They'll always need Hebrew instruction, and how could they get anyone better than you?"

Yes, she'd overcome greater difficulties than this. When Bruce retired, seven years ago, she knew: it wouldn't be the same without him. She'd almost considered leaving, but he wouldn't hear of it. Don't you dare, he told her; we built the Jewish Studies program together. You carry on what we started. I'm here, he reassured her, I'm not going anywhere. You can come to me for advice about anything, even the smallest matter. She believed him. But two years ago his wife Chana's health had deteriorated and they moved to assisted living in Chicago, where their oldest son lived. And now, this year, everything had been turned upside down again. Tamar had gone back to Israel, and Shelley had retired. Shelley was the one who tied her to this university, lent her his status as a professor of Jewish History. And Tamar – Tamar is my good fortune, she liked to tell everyone, not least Tamar herself. Years of courting the college administration and community donors had finally led to a Hebrew and Jewish literature position opening up seven years ago. How hard Bruce had worked for that position. "It's my gift to the college, before I retire," he told her once. And Tamar was a gift. She came from Jerusalem, with a husband and two little girls, and they had an immediate connection. "You remind me so much of myself when I arrived," she once told Tamar when they were sitting in the back yard. The girls were playing on the lawn and they sipped coffee and ate her chocolate babka. "Sometimes it seems like yesterday. Hard to believe it's been more than thirty years."

They celebrated all the holidays together, she and Shelley and Tamar and Amir and their girls. She was like a grandmother to Adi and Inbar, and Yotam, who arrived four years later. The

girls cried when they said goodbye to her. She could hardly hold back her own tears. But she was so happy for Tamar and Amir, knowing how hard it was for them to be far from Israel, from their families, and how incredibly fortunate they'd been to both find jobs back home. "Of course, there's no question," she'd encouraged Tamar when she came to her deliberating – after all, it wasn't an easy thing to leave two excellent jobs. "If you have the opportunity, you should go back. Later it's not always possible. I say that from experience." Yes, much as she was sad for herself, she was happy for Tamar and Amir. "I just hope they don't cancel the position," she kept murmuring, like an oath, "so we can get another Hebrew professor."

Her prayers were answered. Bruce, from the depths of his retirement, was able to convince them to reopen the position. Robert, the chair of Middle Eastern Studies, came especially to inform her. She was slightly wary of him when he came from Chicago to take over as chair – after all, he was an Arabic history scholar – but to her surprise he was fine. More than fine. And Heba, his wife, who was her counterpart in Arabic instruction, was lovely. Robert made sure to update her when they reopened the position and reported to her cheerfully about a good slate of applicants. He also made sure she could come to the candidates' job talks. "It's nice of him," she said to Shelley, "he doesn't have to do that. After all, I'm not part of the academic faculty." Robert came to her office right after the hiring committee met to decide on the final candidates. She was sitting with a student who'd missed a whole week of Hebrew because of a family trip to the Caribbean, helping him catch up. Robert stood in the doorway, glowing: "We have three excellent applicants! We can't go wrong with any of them." Still, she asked him to tell her a little, to satisfy her curiosity, and Robert said there was a candidate from Israel – she taught at Bar-Ilan University – and another who taught at Brandeis, and one more – here he made a barely perceptible pause – who was remarkably impressive. Ph.D. from Berkeley. Now at Columbia. On a post-doc.

The candidates made their campus visits, in the order Robert had named them. First Rakefet from Bar-Ilan, then Karen from Brandeis, and finally Yoad from Columbia. She promised herself that she would keep an open mind, with no biases. She reminded herself that this was a colleague, a professor of literature, not a substitute for Tamar. That the decision wasn't hers anyway. That she should be glad they were filling the position at all. But still, what a difference between the first two candidates and him. Karen and Rakefet gave straightforward lectures, taught excellent demonstration classes, visited her Hebrew lesson, and said they would be happy

to work with her, collaboratively. While Yoad... She hardly understood a word of his job talk. He taught his demonstration class offhandedly, aiming at his interviewers rather than at the students. In the brief meeting scheduled for them, he acted as if he couldn't understand why they needed to talk at all. She spent fifteen minutes trying to spur him on. Told him in great detail about the Hebrew language program, how it had started from barely two courses four decades ago, and now she had a little empire – she smiled, but he did not smile back. He dropped in on her class out of obligation. She introduced her students: Shira, Noah, Scott-Shaul, Laurel-Dafna – “In my class everyone has a Hebrew name,” she explained, “If they weren't given one, they can choose one.” She was particularly proud when she introduced him to Kwan from Vietnam, who was studying Hebrew so that one day he could read the Bible, and Faisal from Saudi Arabia, her protégé, her personal contribution to peace between the nations, to a better world. But Yoad was unimpressed, and he seemed downright averse to Faisal.

Everyone else, though, praised him and talked about him admiringly. She suspected their awe contained more than a modicum of self-deprecation when it came to the big universities, the ones on the coasts. That always irritated her. What was so bad about the Midwest? This was the real America, the warmhearted, welcoming one—she couldn't have survived even a month in New York. But she kept quiet, of course. Not that anyone was asking her. And when she heard they'd chosen Yoad she was not surprised. “I just hope he comes,” everyone prayed in hushed tones, “I hope he accepts our offer...” She nodded, but silently hoped: I hope Rakefet comes. Or Karen. Anyone but him. I hope he gets a better offer in New York, or Boston, or Los Angeles. But she knew: this was the only current job opening in Hebrew literature. And indeed, as early as May, Robert came to see her, all aglow: “I'm telling you first because I thought you'd be happy to hear: Yoad Bergman-Harari just let me know he'll be joining us next year!”

From that very first visit, everyone was already uttering his name with meaningful gravity. *Yoad Bergman-Harari*. She'd asked him, in their short meeting, how the double-barreled name had come about. She was used to young women carrying around two names, but why him? He looked at her as if considering whether or not to even bother with an answer, and then explained that he'd been born Yoad Harari, but during his university studies he'd added on his father's original name, Bergman.

“But why?” she pressed. Was he very attached to his grandfather?

“To negate the negation of the diaspora,” he replied, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

She stared at him for a moment. To negate the negation of the diaspora. She’d never heard of that. And for her it was the greatest pride: she had been given a Modern Hebrew name, Ilana, in a generation where most little girls had old-fashioned diasporic names like Batya and Tzippi and Penina. She was Ilana Drori in a class full of Druckmans and Lipstadts and Shmucklers. And when she got married she felt genuinely wrenched by having to become Ilana Goldstein. Although now, after forty years, she was used to it. Still, she wanted to understand: “What do you mean, to negate the negation of the diaspora?”

“I mean, my father tried to erase my grandfather, and my grandfather’s father, and my grandfather’s grandfather. And I want to reinstate them, but without erasing my father. That’s the whole story.”

She looked at him as though she’d suddenly discovered something novel. “That’s very nice. I like that. I’m sure your grandfather was pleased,” she offered, and tried it out for herself: Ilana Freiman-Drori. No. No good.

Now, as she walks out of the women’s restroom, she glances at her watch: almost fifteen minutes till the first class. She could stop by Yoad’s to greet him on his first day. Or she could pop into the library to find out what Shelley was up to. She’s a little worried about him, this being the first day of the first school year when he will no longer be teaching. They promised each other that nothing would change, they’d keep driving to campus together every morning. It’s just that he wouldn’t be teaching. He could finally devote his time to research, to the book he’s been promising himself to finish for almost a decade, about Jews in the Midwest in the first half of the twentieth century. Still, she is worried. Perhaps needlessly, but she is. She is also worried about her class. True, the drop in enrollment did not start today, but this year she only has eight students signed up for beginners Hebrew. She’s never had such a low point. Although... She consoles herself: these kids are so disorganized. They just forget to register. There have been years when hardly anyone was registered and then twenty people turned up for the first class.

She decides to look in on the glass-walled reading hall before class, secretly hoping not to find Shelley there. Yes, she knows he likes to dawdle a little before work, to skim the daily papers and magazines – *Time*, *The Economist*, *Newsweek* – but it’s already nine-forty-five, she

left him there more than an hour ago, and she's afraid he might still be there instead of working. She is relieved when she does not see him among the handful of people sitting on the couches leafing through magazines, but on her way to class she spots him standing in line at the café outside the library, his shoulders slightly hunched, his button-up shirt standing out among the casually dressed students around him, most of whom are much taller than him. It's too bad: they could have had coffee together. Why hadn't she thought of that? Her craving for coffee increases as she walks to the Meyer Building, which she still calls Building 52, as it was known when she first started teaching here. But the closer she gets to the classroom, the more her thoughts home in on her lesson and the moment when she will enter the classroom. She's already learned: so much depends on that moment. It can determine how many of them will be there for the next class. It sets the tone for the whole year.

When she walks into the room she stands there for a moment, speechless. There are only four students. Could this be the wrong room? But she knows very well it's the right one: eight students signed up for Hebrew and half of them haven't shown up. She checked on the enrollment last night. They could have changed their mind overnight... A sweaty young man wearing a sports tank top squeezes through the doorway. Sorry, he mumbles, and sits down at the edge of the C formed by the tables. "It's fine," she says, although he obviously can't understand her. That's her method: only Hebrew. From day one. She pulls herself together, puts her bag on the chair, her papers on the table, and flashes them a big grin as she says her first word of the first lesson, the word she has said so many times: *Shalom!*

By the end of the class, two more students have joined. One girl with childish round cheeks and traces of acne, who looks as though she's having trouble waking up, her eyes drooping shut several times during class, and another who explains that she sat in on a different class first, to decide which one she prefers. That, too, is a recent phenomenon. It used to be that students registered and that was that. Now they call the first week "shopping week," and they have no qualms about moving from class to class, "shopping around" to see what they like.

She enlists all her powers to enliven the class. It's not easy to conduct a lesson entirely in Hebrew when none of the students speaks a word. She relies on there almost always being someone who remembers a few words from Jewish day school. Sometimes there's even a student with an Israeli parent, or a grandmother in Israel. She introduces herself, as she has done forty times, and teaches them their first Hebrew sentence: My name is Ilana. "*Korim li Ilana,*" she

says slowly. They repeat after her: *Korim li Chloe. Korim li Michael. Korim li Sheila.* The student with the acne stares at her. “*Korim li...*” Ilana tries to help her along. “Claire,” she finally completes the sentence. “*Korim li Claire,*” Ilana accentuates, but Claire stares back at her without repeating the words. Ilana hands out rulers with the Hebrew alphabet for them to study at home, and they practice conversing with each other: My name is Michael. What is your name? My name is Sheila. Nice to meet you. They all have trouble with masculine and feminine, but Claire, it seems, doesn’t even grasp that there’s a difference.

After class she can’t resist stopping by Yoad’s office. The door is shut. Strange, on his first day. But as she walks away he comes toward her holding a paper coffee cup. His eyes are half-shut eyes, like Claire’s.

“Oh, hello!” she calls out, and he stops to scrutinize her, as if trying to figure out who she is and what she wants.

“Ilana,” she reminds him, “Ilana Goldstein, the Hebrew teacher.”

Finally, an expression: “Oh, yes. Hi.”

How old is he? she wonders. When he came here in the spring he’d looked very young, barely thirty, but now, looking closer, he seems to have aged. He suddenly looks Barak’s age. Maybe even Yael’s. Even in this end-of-August heat he’s wearing a button-down shirt. Not like Shelley’s, though. She can tell immediately. His shirt is of a finer fabric, very tight-fitting, with tiny little checks in white and burgundy. And his glasses: initially they look like the horn-rimmed frames that went out of fashion in the seventies, but she can tell that this is the latest trend in New York, purchased for hundreds of dollars in a store in SoHo, or the Village, or wherever it is young people shop these days. And as if the shirt and glasses are not deceptive enough, his cheeks are covered with a soft, light beard, not a thick one, but much more than the stubble he’d sported last spring.

Yoad takes a sip and grimaces. “This coffee is shit.”

“Next time, go to the coffee place by the library,” she says, offering a local tip. It just opened a year ago, and the whole campus is abuzz. It’s like New York and San Francisco, or Seattle: they roast their own beans, micro-variants. She herself tried it a few times and was embarrassed to admit that she found their coffee bitter and sour.

He tosses the cup in the trash can at the end of the hallway. “That’s where I got this.”

“So how are you?” she makes another attempt. “How did your first day go?”

When he opens his mouth to answer, a yawn escapes. “It was fine,” he mutters, but adds that he hasn’t taught yet – his class starts the next day. “I can’t be bothered....” He doesn’t even attempt to hide the second yawn.

“Yes, it’s hard at first,” she agrees, but she is surprised: she also feels near her breaking point sometimes, in the middle of the semester or near the end, with the tedious routine and the homework she’s marked dozens of times and the students with all their excuses. But on the first day of school she always feels festive and uplifted, even today, after forty years. How is it possible, she wonders, to be so worn down before you’ve even taught a single class?

“When did you get here?” she asks.

“Two days ago.”

She lets out a little yelp of surprise. Two days before the semester starts!

“I had a conference,” Yoad says, pronouncing the words slowly, strenuously, as though debating whether it would be worth his time to explain. “In New York,” he adds eventually.

“Great, great. So you’ve just arrived,” she says, thinking out loud. “You’re not settled into your apartment yet. It must be hard to move here and start teaching straight away.” She invites him for dinner on Friday night.

Looking stunned, Yoad Bergman-Harari blinks, but accepts the invitation.

2

On the way home she asks Shelley how his day was.

“It was fine,” he replies, “absolutely fine.” He, too, like Yoad Bergman-Harari, speaks slowly, drawing out his words.

“What did you work on?”

His face has the expression of a child caught playing hooky. “I started rereading an article I read ages ago, which I need for the book...”

“And?”

“When I went out for coffee I ran into Susan Marcus. Remember her?”

“No.”

“She did administrative work in our department, years ago. Then she moved to biology.”

Well, of course. Only her Shelley would remember every last minor secretary who left two decades ago.

“She’s having some trouble at the moment,” he says, and then gives her the details: she’s been diagnosed with arthritis. She missed a lot of work because of the treatments and the pain that kept her home. Now they’re pressuring her to take early retirement, they’re sick of it – why should they deal with all this when they can hire someone young and healthy to replace her? There is suppressed anger in Shelley’s voice. “But she hasn’t accumulated enough in her pension fund – she only went back to work in her forties, when the kids were grown – and she can’t withdraw the maximum from Social Security because she’s only sixty-three. Poor woman, she was practically in tears. What is she supposed to do?”

“Doesn’t she have a husband? Family?”

“She’s divorced. The kids can’t help her, they have their own families to support. How can the college allow this sort of thing to happen?” Shelley asks in disbelief, as if he hasn’t been working here for forty years, as if he doesn’t know that that’s how it goes in this world. He doesn’t spell out what is obvious to her: that he frittered away his whole work day because instead of going back to the library he stuck around to console Susan Marcus.

“What did you tell her?”

“What could I say? I listened. Maybe we can have her over for Shabbat dinner some time,” he suggests.

“Okay,” she agrees unenthusiastically.

“How did your day go?”

“Only seven students showed up. Yesterday I had eight enrolled. I hope it’s just coincidence, that I’ll get more at the next class.”

“Yes,” Shelley concurs, ever the optimist. “I’m sure you will.”

“I met Yoad, the new literature professor. I invited him over for Friday night dinner.”

“Great!”

“He’s only just arrived. Two days before school started. He’s still out of it. He’s my colleague, we’re going to be working together,” she offers as an excuse, although she knows there’s no need, certainly not to Shelley, who enthuses:

“Of course, there’s no question about it! He doesn’t know anyone here yet, I’m glad you asked him over, Ilana.”

*

That same evening someone drops the class. She turns on the computer to see if anyone new has signed up, if she’s received any of the usual emails: Hi Professor, I missed the first class because of soccer practice, or a trip to the ER, or god knows what, can I still join? But instead she discovers that now there are only six registered. The system does not show her the names of the deserters, so she can’t be sure if it was Claire with the acne and the tired eyes, or the one who’d tried out another class and then come late, or someone else entirely. Maybe the first class was bad? She thinks it went fine, same as every year, but could there be things she isn’t seeing? Perhaps something of her anxiety about Shelley, and her sadness over Tamar, seeped into her teaching?

In Advanced Hebrew things are better. She has nine students, seven from last year and two new ones: Daniel, who knows a little Hebrew from home because his father is Israeli, and Donna, who took one year at Emory before transferring here. She leaves the class feeling buoyed. Everything is all right.

On her way to the office she bumps into Robert. “Have you met Yoad yet?” he wants to know. “It’s so wonderful that we have him. I’m really thrilled!” He does look very happy. She tries to smile. “What’s news with you? How are your classes this year?”

She debates saying something about the low enrollment. There’s nothing to hide. He’s the department chair. He’ll soon find out anyway. But something in Robert’s body language projects impatience, as though he’s in a hurry, so she just says, “Everything’s fine.”

“Glad to hear it,” he says with another grin and walks away.

For the rest of the week she busies herself with Friday’s dinner. It’s important for her that it go well. It’s important for her to impress Yoad Bergman-Harari. She won’t invite Ed and Celia, their closest friends who have Shabbat dinner with them at least once a month. Not a good match. And certainly not Hedy Guttman, who she ran into at the grocery store and who immediately asked about the new professor, hinting that she’d love to meet him. No: Hedy is a good woman but she never stops talking. Instead, Ilana invites David Stern, a colleague of

Shelley's who teaches Modern Jewish History, with his wife Gila, and Ulrike Claassen from Religious Studies, a non-Jewish but Israel-loving German woman. She considers asking Robert and Heba, but decides not to. They've never been to her home. She can't do it out of the blue. So she tacks on Miriam Fein, an English professor. They don't know each other very well, and Miriam's never been over, even though they belong to the same synagogue, but there needs to be someone young. Someone from literature.

After she's done with the invitations, she endlessly frets over the menu. What to buy. What to cook. For years she's cooked the same Friday night dinner: chicken soup, brisket with prunes or honey-soy-sauce chicken, potatoes or rice with a little turmeric and saffron, a green salad, compote and cake. The guests always praise the food, but now for some reason she feels restless. Everything seems wrong, old-fashioned. It's summer, she rationalizes. It's still hot. The food should be seasonal. Not chicken soup and brisket. She spends almost half a day on the shopping. She goes to the expensive new store with the organic produce. For the entrée she buys fresh spinach-and-ricotta ravioli. Tomatoes with mozzarella instead of soup. And for the salad, a new kind of dark leafy green in a special perforated bag, so it can breathe. By Friday afternoon she's getting nervous. Rule number one: never try out new recipes on guests. But it's too late, she has no other option, and she had that ravioli at Tamar's once, she saw exactly how to cook it – what could go wrong?

While she bakes her chocolate babka, she thinks about Tamar. How many Shabbat dinners they had together. How many holidays. How many hours spent together. They'd promised to stay in touch, to talk on the phone every week, but it's been almost two months since Tamar left and they've only had two short, hollow conversations: How are things? Fine, everything's okay. The kids are having a tough time, but they'll get used to it. Yes, it's very hot. We'd forgotten what it's like. She could call Tamar now. It was Friday evening there, they'd probably be home. But when she walks over to the phone, she changes her mind. It's nine-thirty in Israel. Tamar and Amir are probably busy putting the kids to bed. And she has to start cooking.

Yoad arrives on time. This surprises her a little. For some reason she was sure he'd be late, which is why she'd told him to come half an hour earlier than the other guests. She opens the door still in her slippers, her right hand in an oven mitt, having just removed a burning hot baking dish.

He stands in the doorway, wearing a checkered button-down shirt in dark blue and ivory, holding a bottle of wine. “Is it here?” he seems to wonder, “am I on time?”

“Come in, come in,” she says, apologizing as she ducks into the kitchen to turn down the stove. “Shelley?” she calls into the hallway. Lately he’s had trouble hearing. She apologizes again and walks almost all the way to his study: “Shelley!”

When she comes back she finds Yoad staring straight ahead, straining his eyes to decipher the tiny letters of her wedding *ketubah* that hangs on the wall. It used to be fashionable to have a calligrapher or a graphic artist design a special rendition of the wedding vows, to be framed and hung in the living room. She has no idea if young people still do that, but Yoad looks as if he’s never come across anything so peculiar. From there his gaze wanders on to the large silver candlesticks on the dining table, with two lit candles, then to her collection of *hamsas* hanging on the wall, and the Passover dish and menorahs arranged on the buffet. Out of the corner of her eye she can see that he recognizes the Chagall reproduction that hangs next to the *hamsas*. Now she sees her home through his eyes and feels suddenly ashamed of this house she’s always been so proud of. She can guess what he’s thinking: all the trimmings of a classic Jewish diasporic home. Her—diasporic! But then she stops: after all, he’s the one who took the name Bergman to negate the negation of diaspora. Still, she feels uncomfortable, compelled to defend herself from that gaze. Why is he lingering on the *hamsas*, the *ketubah*, the menorahs? He spends no time on the photos crowding the buffet. That was usually a sure way to break the ice and start a conversation with guests. She was always happy to narrate: the picture of their wedding from ’75, in slightly faded colors; Barak and Yael – he a baby, barely standing, she with pigtails and missing front teeth; the two of them in their Purim costumes, Wonderwoman and Superman; Barak at his bar mitzvah; the four of them at Yael’s high school graduation – her whole life on display for anyone who entered the house. But Yoad Bergman-Harari, so it would seem, is uninterested.

Shelley is still absent. When she’d gone to call him, she’d realized he wasn’t in his study but in the bathroom. She has no choice but to have Yoad sit down on the comfortable, heavy couch in the living room, which she now also sees through his eyes, offer him something to drink, and try to strike up a conversation.

“Wine would be nice,” he concedes.

She dallies in the kitchen for a while until she finds the opener, then hands it to Yoad and suggests he open the bottle he brought. “I’m really bad at it. You have no idea.”

Now that the two of them are sitting, she can ask him about his work. She's heard so many accolades, as though he alone is going to elevate the department, perhaps even the whole college, by several degrees.

Yoad thinks for a moment before answering. She assumes it's not because he doesn't know what his field is, but rather that he's debating how to present the topic to her. "Basically, it's about Heidegger as a Jewish writer," he finally says, and leaves her staring at him.

"Heidegger?" she asks in disbelief. "Isn't he the Nazi?"

A forgiving expression comes over Yoad's face: Oh, honestly. At the corner of his mouth she notices the beginning of a smile. "The idea, basically, is to examine the question of what Jewish literature is from a new perspective. To challenge that inquiry. To problematize it. What is Jewish literature? Is it Sholem Aleichem? Agnon? Is it Saul Bellow? Today there is fairly broad agreement that Jewish literature is not only what is written in Hebrew or Yiddish, not even only what is written by Jews. Dan Miron has talked about the Judaisation of European literature in the twentieth century. So basically, my idea is that the literary expanse is full of broken vessels of Jewish contexts, which find their place in twentieth century literature and thought throughout Europe, and it is precisely Heidegger," he accentuates the name, "who manifests that notion so plainly, and I stand behind that claim, problematic as it may be."

"That's interesting..." She is unsure how to go on without exposing herself, without sounding ridiculous. Everything he said is completely new and incomprehensible to her. "But you work on Hebrew literature too, don't you?"

Yoad gestures ambiguously. "If it's related to my topic, yes."

"There's a lot of interest in Hebrew literature in the community. Including from Israelis – there are more and more of them recently, from the university, and now they come to work in the tech industry, too – and Americans. At the synagogue we have a Hebrew book club. The Israelis read the original and the Americans read it in translation. They're really thirsty for Hebrew literature. They read a lot. Everything that comes out. Amos Oz, A. B. Yehoshua, and the new writers too – Etgar Keret. Everything."

She expects some expression of interest, a smile, an acknowledgement, but Yoad simply nods blankly.

“It would be wonderful if you came to talk to us some time. Not now,” she quickly reassures him, “of course, with all the pressure of the new year and the teaching, I know how that is. But one day...”

Yoad says nothing. Just nods his head noncommittally.

“And for the last few years Tamar and I – you know who Tamar is, right?” she asks, but doesn’t stop to heap praise on her, so as not to embarrass him, “we tried to bring an Israeli author or poet to campus every year. We don’t have a permanent budget, even though we started working on that too, raising funds from the community, but every year we made it work, we applied for grants, all sorts of university funders, the consulate also helped out. It was a big success. I would be thrilled if it continued.”

She doesn’t go on to state the obvious: that she needs his backing to keep the visits going. He belongs to the academic faculty, she’s an adjunct and has no authority to act alone. But Yoad doesn’t get the hint, and she decides to let it go. This is not the time to discuss that.

Instead she tells him about the Hebrew program, and which courses she teaches. It’s very important for her to stress that she sees the program as an integral part of the array of Jewish studies on campus. She tells him about the Biblical Hebrew class offered every other year, which is always a big success. When she gets to the seminar she co-taught with Tamar, “Hebrew Literature in Context,” offered by the comparative literature department, she finally detects a flicker of interest in his eyes. “And I’ve been thinking of doing something with the creative writing program. It’s an old dream of mine. I take evening courses, too, continuing education, in creative writing. In English,” she clarifies. She barely plucks up the courage to say: “I can show you something I wrote. I’d be very interested in your opinion. There aren’t many people here who understand this sort of thing and read Hebrew too...”

The last words are drowned out by the sound of the toilet flushing, followed by running water, and by the time Shelley joins them Yoad has explained that he’s sorry, but he’s not the right person to give that sort of assessment.

“Of course you are!” she contradicts him, “You’re a professor of literature!”

“I hardly read any literature.”

She is horrified: “How is that possible?”

“Literature for me is the material, not the instrument,” he explains with a shrug. “I look at what I need but the only thing I read seriously is the instruments: mostly philosophy. A little psychoanalysis. Here and there some sociology, anthropology. You know, just enough.”

Before she can think what to say, Shelley joins them and they switch to English. Yoad’s English sounds so natural, accentless. Only his intonation occasionally gives him away. And some of his vowels. In English he sounds softer. Something of the roughness he evinces in Hebrew is gone.

“Where is your English from?” Ilana wonders. Even she can hear her own accent, so prominent compared to his, as though they are not from the same country.

Yoad doesn’t understand the question. He went to Berkeley. Did a post-doc at Columbia.

“But before that... Were you ever in the States? As a child?”

He explains that he was born in the U.S. His father was studying here. “And then he had a sabbatical when I was in kindergarten. And a few times we came for a couple of months in summer.”

“Oh,” she says, as if that clarifies it all.

Before the conversation resumes, the doorbell rings, and David and Gila arrive, just at the same time as Ulrike. After a few moments Miriam walks in, and they all sit down to eat.

The evening went fine. Very well, even. She did notice Yoad’s expression when Shelley said a blessing over the wine, a sort of distaste he could not hide, but she forgave him. She used to be that way too. Everyone used to seem so diasporic to her. So funny, with their customs. And the hypocrisy! Saying *kiddush* and lighting candles but driving their cars to synagogue on the Sabbath? But by now she’d acclimated and could hardly remember how she felt when she’d just arrived.

Other than that, though, it really was fine. Everyone liked the food. Even Yoad took seconds of the ravioli and salads. There was lively conversation. David and Miriam looked approvingly at Yoad when he told them about his research on Heidegger. She saw David’s smile widen and Miriam nodding her head seriously when Yoad claimed that Heidegger was in fact a decidedly Jewish writer. Yoad seemed to come to life when he learned that Miriam was affiliated with Comparative Literature. He quizzed her about the program a little. What sort of work did they do? Were they interested in inter-departmental collaboration? Shelley wanted to know where

Yoad's parents were born. And his grandparents. Yoad was happy to explain – the negation of the negation of diaspora, no doubt – and when it turned out that his paternal grandparents were from a little town near the one Shelley's grandmother had come from, there was great excitement at the table. Gila asked where in Israel Yoad was from, how many siblings he had, where he'd gone to school. Yoad said he was originally from Herzliya, he had a younger brother and an older sister, both still in Israel. Ilana started to see him in a different light: not a snob from New York who'd come to the boonies to look down on everyone, but just a young man alone in a new place. She wanted to help him, to do everything she could to make it easier for him. She was in that position once too, after all.

Gila huddled with her in the kitchen when they were clearing the dishes. "We have to find him a woman," she said, lowering her voice. "Or a man," she added after a pause, with a self-satisfied smile, proving how modern and cosmopolitan she was.

"It was nice," Ilana said to Shelley before turning the light out that night.

He gave a *hmmm* of agreement.

"But it's not Tamar."

"No, it's not Tamar."

"Do you think he'll last here?" she asked.

Shelley took so long to answer that she suspected he'd fallen asleep. "Depends. It's hard to say."

"It's hard to say," she agreed. "I'll give Tamar a call tomorrow."

3

She resists checking the enrollment for Beginners Hebrew over the weekend, and on Monday when she walks into class she finds four students again. Two others eventually turn up, the sweaty basketball player in the tank-top and Claire. She's still there. Ilana strains her memory and realizes the drop-out is Michael, the only one of the lot who'd seemed really bright. She finds it hard not to be disappointed. She keeps mulling it over in her mind. Maybe she'd been

wrong to hold up the class and help out Claire, and that had put off the good students? She should have done that in her office, not in class. Certainly not on the first day.

After class she notices someone waving at her feebly, noncommittally. When he gets closer, she recognizes Yoad. She wishes him a good morning, considers for a few seconds whether to stop and ask how he is, but he's already gone. It's a good thing she invited him for that dinner. Now she's sorry she didn't stop him after all, to remind him about the Jewish Studies reception on Thursday afternoon. She doesn't want him to forget, what with all the busyness of the start of the year. And indeed, when she arrives at the reception, at precisely five-thirty, Yoad isn't there. She looks forward to this event every year. A chance to meet everyone, all the faculty members whose research is in any way connected to Judaism – from literature, history, religious studies – and those who aren't directly connected, like Rebecca Fischbein from English who smiles at her as she walks by with a glass of white wine in one hand a canapé in the other, and Jack Melzer from political science, whose son was in kindergarten with Barak, and he still greets her warmly after all these years. Not to mention all the supporters and donors from the community. Lots of them she knows from synagogue. She likes them to see her in her natural surroundings and remember that she teaches at the university. Yes, she loves this reception. She feels safe here, surrounded by her people, her community. She feels that she's set down roots in this country.

Rebecca Fischbein asks how she is. She heard Shelley's retired. Ilana confirms: Yes, Shelley retired this year, but he's still working at full tilt. Hoping to finish his book. Rebecca rolls her eyes: "Lucky him! If only I could do that... Where is he? I'll say hello."

Shelley is standing in the corner with Sydney Fleischman and his wife. Sidney retired twenty-five years ago. Now he's over ninety. He looks very frail with his walker. Without hearing what their conversation is about, Ilana can see Shelley trying to speak slowly and clearly. Despite his hearing aid, Sidney is completely deaf. She considers going over to help Shelley out. It's so like him, on an evening like this, to talk with Sidney. What a kind soul. She doesn't have half his kindness, and wouldn't be capable of wasting this evening by standing around with Sidney. Especially since this is her chance to talk to so many people. "Hello," she says to Yigal Shoham, a math professor she once met at Tamar's. Yigal apologizes and asks her to remind him who she is. "Oh, yes," he finally remembers. The woman next to him smiles at her; Nurit, if she remembers correctly. When she first came here there were very few Israelis. You could count

them on one hand. And back then they'd all get together on holidays, at parties, and meet for sing-alongs. Now there are so many, and no one knows each other anymore.

Hedy Guttman, so diminutive that she reaches only slightly above Ilana's shoulder, touches her arm: "Where is he?"

"Shelley? He's over there, with Sidney and Margaret. You'd be doing me a personal favor if you could get him away from them..."

"No, no," Hedy shakes her head impatiently. "Your professor, what's his name – Yoash?"

"Yoad."

"You must introduce me to him!" She gives an unpleasant smile and winks crookedly: "I heard he's not only a genius but a looker, too. So, where is he?"

"I have no idea. I haven't seen him here."

Hedy gives her an exasperated look and walks away. The chair of Jewish Studies, Simon Herschensohn, comes over when he spots her: "Where is Yoad?"

His voice barely disguises his impatience, as though she's personally responsible for Yoad and his absence. Perhaps there is something to that. She should have reminded him. He's probably just trying to keep his head above water, making time for all his teaching commitments. He might have forgotten. "Maybe he can't find the room," she suggests. Simon nods uneasily, glancing at his watch – it's five to six already – and eyes the waiters standing by the tables with dinner ready. "We have to start," he declares.

But a moment before Simon clangs his knife against his wine glass to give a speech, Yoad arrives. He stands to one side listening as Simon talks about all the Center's wonderful activities last year, and enumerates plans for the current year. When he introduces the new faculty members and asks the crowd to welcome them warmly, he lingers especially on "Yoad Bergman-Harari, who has come to us from Columbia University, after studying at Berkeley and Tel Aviv," and heaps praise on Yoad's work and "future contributions to our intellectual community." Yoad, it seems to Ilana, pushes out a calcified smile. He takes the compliments for granted. When Simon finally finishes, most of the guests hurry to the buffet, but several go up to meet Yoad. He still smiles that slightly furious smile, giving a faint nod as a collective hello to them all. Donors who have excellent connections with the Center want to talk to him, and he answers curtly, begrudgingly.

“Now you must introduce me to him,” Hedy Guttman says, grabbing Ilana’s wrist, and she feels like shaking her off. She’s not crazy about Hedy as it is, and she doesn’t want Yoad thinking they’re friends, but Hedy will not relent, so they walk over to him together. Just as Yoad manages to get away from some old lady with a helmet of hair and a bright blue pants-suit – Ilana has no idea who she is, despite having seen her several times at these receptions – Hedy stands in front of him, blocking his exit, and holds out her tiny hand with heavy rings and manicured nails. Before Ilana walks away, she catches Hedy telling Yoad about the Hebrew book club at the synagogue and introducing herself as its organizer. Such chutzpah! She stands a short distance away and listens: Let’s see what else she has the audacity to tell him, that liar. Everyone knows *she* was the one who started the club. She was the founder, she suggests which books to read, she brings the lecturers. What had Hedy done? Brought a few friends who were as dumb and garrulous as her? Organized the refreshments?

“...And my sister made *aliya*,” she hears Hedy say, “I have lots of family in Israel!”

Yoad nods, expressionless. “Oh?” he comments in a bore tone, but Hedy takes it as a question and goes on: “Yes, she lives in a lovely house in Ma’aleh Adumim. The views in that place are something else. You can see the whole desert from her living room.”

“In that case,” Yoad says, seeming to perk up, “she doesn’t live in Israel.”

“But she does,” Hedy insists, “I told you, it’s next to Jerusalem. Ma’aleh Adumim – don’t you know it?”

“No, I don’t,” Yoad explains, “because I don’t go to the occupied territories. Ma’aleh Adumim is not Israel. It’s Palestine.”

Hedy gives him a stunned look. The woman who never shuts her mouth is rendered, finally, speechless. Now Ilana is grateful to Yoad for sticking it to her. Serves her right, that Hedy. She turns away so no one can see the grin spreading over her face.

4

She works with the students on Rosh Hashanah cards. They carefully draw the letters they’ve just learned and talk about their wishes for the new year. On the board, under the words “Shana

Tova,” she writes, in Hebrew: “I want...” They try it: “I want to study well.” “I want to succeed.” She teaches them the words in Hebrew and writes them on the board. They slowly build a list of wishes for themselves: good grades, new friends, parties. And what does she wish herself for the new year? Ilana wonders. What would she like to happen? For Barak to finally get married. For Yael to have a baby – it’s almost the last minute for her. For Shelley to get his book done. For Tamar to come back. For her to be young again... She pushes away those thoughts. All she wants is for everyone to be healthy. That’s enough.

Yoad smiles back at her when they meet in the hallway. She wishes him Shana Tova and wonders if she should ask what he’s doing for the holiday. No, she decides. What for? She can’t ask him over. She and Shelley are alone this year on Rosh Hashanah. She asked Barak to come but he said he couldn’t just pop over in the middle of the week. “Maybe we can celebrate on Sunday night?” she suggests, even though that was always her red line – she’d never understood how these Americans could do it, rescheduling a holiday for the weekend so it would be more convenient. But this time, if it meant Barak could be there, she was willing to do it. But Barak said he had plans for the weekend. She fished for details: maybe he finally had someone? Plans with friends, he answered cryptically. As for Yael, she really could not make demands on her. She lived in Oregon, two flights away. Celia and Ed had invited them, but she’d somehow wriggled out of it and suggested they go over on the second night instead, just for coffee and honey cake. She didn’t want to intrude on their family gathering: their three sons would be there. One of them lived nearby and the other in Chicago, but the older one was coming from New Jersey with his whole family. Celia said it wouldn’t be an intrusion, they were absolutely invited, and Ari and Noah and Jon would be so happy to see them. But Ilana thought she detected a note of relief on Celia’s face when she said they’d just come for coffee. She was not only avoiding the dinner for altruistic reasons – much as she hated to admit it, she didn’t feel like seeing all those grandchildren running around. Eight of them, soon to be nine. The noise was unbearable.

In the morning of the holiday she calls Tamar to wish her Shana Tova and ask if her card arrived. She’d also sent gifts for the children, but she doesn’t mention that. She wants them to be surprised. Tamar is happy to hear from her, but even over the phone Ilana can tell she’s a little stressed. “No, it’s fine,” Tamar says when Ilana asks if she’s busy, “it’s just that we’re having my parents tonight, and Amir’s whole family, they’ll be here any minute...”

“I just wanted to find out if you got our card...”

Tamar says they haven't. Ilana is disappointed. She put so much effort into choosing the gifts, and made a point of sending them early, so they'd get there by the holiday.

"We have such problems with the postal service here," Tamar says, "it's a disaster. They're writing about it in all the papers."

"It'll get there eventually," Ilana consoles Tamar and herself. "All right, sweetheart, I won't keep you. I'm sure you have lots to do."

"We'll talk over the holiday," Tamar promises, "I'll call tomorrow."

But the holiday comes and goes and Tamar doesn't call. There's no message from her when they get home from morning services at the synagogue, and no one has called by the time they leave for coffee at Ed and Celia's.

She calls Yael, to wish her Shana Tova.

"Really?" Yael sounds surprised, "it's Rosh Hashanah today? I can never remember when it works out."

"Do something for the holiday," Ilana urges her, "apples and honey, that's all."

Yael says that's not a bad idea. Apples are in season. She bought some at the farmer's market. And she has special honey from New Zealand. Full of enzymes. She and Jeff take a teaspoon every morning and they don't get sick all winter.

"Tell Jeff Shana Tova, too," Ilana says. What are they waiting for? That's what she'd really like to know. Yael is turning thirty-nine this year.

Celia looks troubled when she and Shelley visit. As they pour coffee together in the kitchen, she tells Ilana that she's worried about Jon's youngest boy. She's seen enough children to know that something's not right. But Jon just makes fun of her for being over-anxious, and Kayla his wife has hardly talked to her since she dared asking if maybe they should see a child development specialist.

"What can I do?" Celia asks. "Ed says I should let it go. Don't interfere, it's not your child. I know he's right, but tell me, how can I not interfere when that boy is as precious to me as my own son?"

Ilana nods, wondering how to comfort Celia. And she thought that when Yael had a baby her worries would be over.

5

On Friday, at synagogue, Mimi Schwartz stops her after prayers. The first meeting of the Hebrew book club was supposed to be at her place, but they're about to start remodeling. It shouldn't be a problem, though: Hedy volunteered to host. But she's just letting Ilana know.

Ilana thanks her. "Have an easy fast," she wishes her before saying goodbye.

"By the way," Mimi says with a drawl, building up suspense, "I heard your new professor doesn't want to come talk to us."

"What do you mean?"

"I heard... Never mind from who... They tried to interest in him in giving a lecture to the club about contemporary Hebrew literature..." She stops again, enjoying her status as the sole proprietor of this information.

"And...?"

"He said thanks but no thanks."

"He's only just arrived," Ilana says, jumping to Yoad's defense, "you know how it is, with all the stress of the beginning of the year and teaching, and coming here from New York. It's a bit of a culture shock, and a huge workload, he's teaching two classes this semester, very demanding ones..."

Mimi shakes her head. "It's not that he was asked to come next week, or next month, they were just exploring the idea, generally, at some point, this year, next year – but do you know what he said?" Once again, instead of reporting what Yoad said, she pauses for effect.

"Well?"

"That he's not interested in entertaining a gaggle of old ladies looking to stay busy in their retirement!" Mimi stares at her with a triumphant grin, expecting her to be as irate as she is.

"Who was the person who talked to him?" Ilana asks.

Mimi squirms. She promised not to tell. To keep it all a secret...

Ilana has trouble holding back from losing her temper. It's not Yoad she's angry at, but whoever went to see him. Such impudence, to circumvent her authority like that! It must be Hedy. Or maybe Mimi herself. After the damage Hedy did, how could he have responded in any other way? He probably thought that was the human matter in their club: stupid, bored women.

When in fact they were very high-caliber people, each one of them. Doctors, lawyers, professors, and not only women, not at all, lots of men came too...

On the way home Ilana wonders if she should say something to Yoad after the holiday. Tell him the truth about the club – very high-quality people. Not that there weren't a few bored yentas, but perhaps she should insinuate to him that some of these yentas gave money so that he could have a job. No, she decides. What does she need that for?

The day before Yom Kippur Eve, Robert appears in her office doorway. "Are you busy?"

"No, no," she insists, although her class starts in five minutes and she was planning to stop at the restroom.

"I just wanted to ask if anything happened... If you happen to know..."

"What do you mean?"

Robert shifts uncomfortable. "Enrollment for Hebrew is significantly down this year. I'm wondering if there's anything I don't know about?"

"No. Nothing special. Everything's normal." When he doesn't say anything, she adds, "It's the same in all the languages. I talked to Sandra, she says enrollment in Italian is disastrous. And in Russian they've cut down by almost half..."

"Yes," he interrupts, "of course. It's been like this for a few years, since they lowered the requirements. It used to be that every student had to do a whole year of foreign language, and now it's just one semester..."

"And they're surprised enrollment is down!" Ilana quickly jumps on his bandwagon.

"But even within those data... Six students in Beginners Hebrew does raise questions. Perhaps it's because of the war last year?" he suggests.

She wants to dispute that. The war ended last summer, and actually right after that she had twelve students in Beginning Hebrew. But she stops herself. That's all she needs – getting into a political argument. For a moment she wants to ask what's happening in Arabic, how things are with Heba's classes, but she resists again. Who knows where that conversation could lead?

"Well," Robert sums up, "these things happen. Maybe it's just a coincidence."

She watches him walk away. Who knows? Maybe he's got people on his case, from the dean's office. But what will happen if they decide to downsize the Hebrew program? She's worked so hard to bring it to the status of a major language, like Russian or Italian – beginners, advanced, Biblical Hebrew, literature... What will happen if Hebrew ends up like Hindi or

Polish, with just a beginners class offered every two or three years?

After teaching she finds an email from Adina Levinger, the Hillel rabbi. Ilana has been in the U.S. long enough to read between the lines – Adina wishes her Shana Tova and an easy fast – and realize there’s an urgent matter contained in the innocent sounding “Might we have a phone call sometime this week?”

She stops by Adina’s office later that day. Adina is a wonderful woman. Over the years she’s helped Ilana a lot. She owes her so much.

Adina is happy to see her. They hug, and Ilana says yes to a cup of coffee, which Adina makes in the kosher kitchenette she knows so well. Adina shuts the door almost completely when they sit down in her office and says, lowering her voice, “I’m just planning Hillel’s activities for Sukkot. We have a fantastic program this year: we’ll be hosting distinguished guests every evening in the Sukkah, from Israel and other places. I’ll show you the names later, remind me. Anyway, I went to see your new professor to ask if he could visit the Sukkah to talk to the students about Hebrew literature, or read a poem with them, or a story, whatever...” Adina pauses for a moment, hesitating.

Ilana feels embarrassed. For a moment it seems Adina is accusing her of something. “What did he say? Is he too busy?”

Adina gives a sad and very slightly bitter smile. “He said he wouldn’t do it. Just like that. I asked why and all he said was: ‘That’s not my job.’”

“You don’t say!”

“You know, I’m not worried about us. We’ll be fine. We have a fantastic program. The students are very excited about Sukkot. But I thought I should tell you, so perhaps you could talk to him. For his own good, I mean. A few years from now he’ll be up for tenure, and with that attitude...”

Ilana nods vigorously in agreement.

“When he said that to me, ‘I don’t want to,’ he looked like a little boy. He really reminded me of my son when he was two. Maybe it’s some sort of reaction to the whole move to this place,” Adina suggests.

“Aha.”

“Still, someone should give him a bit of a reality check. For his sake, but also for ours. How many Hebrew professors do we have?”

Ilana promises to talk to Yoad. Right after the holiday. They say goodbye with another hug and wish each other Shana Tova

With Yom Kippur in the middle and then the weekend, she's only able to get hold of Yoad five days later. This time it's not a topic for a hallway chat, so she suggests coffee. She can plainly sense Yoad's awkwardness, but it's hard to claim you don't have time for coffee, so he consents.

They walk to the place by the library, the one everyone loves, even though this guarantees that neither he nor she will enjoy their coffee. She makes a point of buying his, and offers a baked good, which he flatly rejects, and before she brings up the issue on her mind she asks how he's doing, how the teaching is going, and if he's feeling more settled. He answers all her questions with a noncommittal "fine." A trace of impatience flickers in his voice, as if he's waiting for her to get to the point.

She begins by reporting on her talk with Robert. When she gives him the data, his face is impervious. He nods without saying a word. "We have to do something," she says, trying to enlist him, "It's a problem with all the languages here, obviously, but Robert thinks there's something particular going on with Hebrew, maybe because of the war last year, although I told him I don't think that has anything to do with it. Fact is, last year there wasn't this big of a problem. But never mind." She is careful not to exhaust him, her time is limited: "The main thing is, we have to make sure Hebrew continues to be offered in its current format. I thought it might be a good idea for you to talk to your students..."

Yoad's eyebrows hunch closer together, and his eyes narrow behind his glasses.

"...to explain to them how important it is, and encourage them to sign up for Hebrew. I know it's the third week but I'm personally willing to sit down with anyone who joins now and go over the material with them. I'd be happy to come to your class for a few moments, at the beginning or the end, to talk to them about Hebrew, about our program..."

"But what do I have to do with all this?" Yoad's voice contains genuine bewilderment.

"You're our Hebrew literature professor!" she explains the obvious.

"But what can I do? My students are mostly from German literature, or philosophy. Why would I tell them to study Hebrew? If anything," he says, weighing his words, "it would be more relevant for them to learn Yiddish."

“Then by all means,” she agrees, “Hebrew will help them with Yiddish. They’re not mutually exclusive.”

Yoad shrugs.

“So will you talk to them? Do whatever you can.”

“I can’t force them to sign up.”

“Who said anything about forcing? Just suggest it. Explain to them how important it is. Give my contact info to anyone who’s interested.”

Yoad nods feebly. He’s already downed his espresso.

“And one more thing,” she says hurriedly, before he can get up and leave. “I talked to Adina Levinger. From Hillel...”

“Yes?”

She notices Yoad stiffen. He’s on guard.

She debates how to start. “I understand you’re very overworked and perhaps it’s not a good time, but even so, I would really like you to make an effort. Our relationship with Hillel is one of the most important aspects of the Hebrew program. That’s where our students come from, yours too, it’s very important that we maintain good ties with them, participate in their activities. It’s always been a significant part of our work, to connect Hebrew culture with the Jewish community on campus.” Then she adds: “And we’re talking about students here, not some synagogue club.” But wary of sounding accusatory, she refocuses on the main point: “This is your university, it’s absolutely part of the job...”

Yoad’s lips are pursed tighter and tighter. His head moves in a barely perceptible shake, right and left. “Not my job.”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s not part of my job. I’m sorry. I’m a comparative literature professor, not a summer camp counselor in the Catskills.”

She sits there gaping, just like Hedy.

Yoad stands up: “Have a great day.”

The chill in his voice makes her shoulders tremble. After he leaves, she clears both cups from the table, his and hers, and throws them in the trash.

It’s a good thing she’s finished teaching for the day, because she is so upset that she couldn’t have focused on class. She has to do something, but she has no idea what. Talk to Robert? What

does Robert care about Adina, or about Hillel? And besides, she's in his crosshairs now, what with the low enrollment.

She replays what Robert said. *Because of the war*. It used to be exactly the opposite: every war would bring a huge wave of support for Israel. When did things turn upside down? Maybe she should talk to Simon Herschensohn. After a moment she dismisses the idea. Simon might care about Hillel, but what sway does he have over Mr. Bergman-Harari?

She feels so bad about Adina. She considers offering to come for Sukkot herself. She could read poetry with the students. Teach them a story. But no, why would they want her? They want someone young and energetic and up-to-date from Israel. For the first time, she wonders if her age is a factor in the low enrollment. After all, when she started teaching she was not much older than the students. And for years after that she was still young – with a baby, then two little kids, much younger than the students' parents. Now she could almost be their grandmother. In fact, not almost.

On Saturday morning Tamar calls to thank her for the card and the gifts. "You're the best, Ilana! Thank you so much. The girls love the presents."

"Wonderful!" Ilana exclaims, "I'm so happy they got there in the end."

"Yes. After we got a second notice from the post office, Amir went to see what it was. We'd forgotten how lazy the mail carriers here are. Anything more than a letter, they won't deliver, they just leave this orange note, and we thought it was a parking ticket."

Ilana asks if she can talk to one of the kids. She misses them. But Adi is out with her dad, and Inbar has a friend over, and Yotam is napping. "What's new with you?" Tamar asks.

"Everything's good."

She hopes Tamar doesn't ask about the Hebrew program. She can't lie to her. But all Tamar says is, "Great, I'm glad."

She takes her basket and goes to the farmer's market, as she does every Saturday. Fresh apples. Beets. Blue corn. You can tell fall is here. On an improvised side stall – a folding table, that's all – she sees a few tasteless giant radishes, huge pumpkins, shriveled carrots. Inedible vegetables. Maybe for soup. On a folding stool behind the table sits a woman around her own age. No one goes over to her. No one is interested in her produce. Ilana considers buying something from her, but she stops herself: what could she possibly do with that radish?

6

In the first week of October, the university's continuing education program starts. Ilana is excited about the course she signed up for: "Introduction to Memoir Writing." She's always made a point of learning new things. She arrived here with a teaching certificate and so many gaps in her education, and over the years she's taken several continuing ed classes, in history, literature, Judaism. In recent years she's developed a passion for writing. Not fiction—memoir.

She makes sure to cook dinner early for her and Shelley. She clears the dishes, so they won't be waiting for her when she gets home. Shelley wishes her good luck. He says he'll use the time to work on his book.

At five to seven the classroom is almost completely full. She hesitates for a moment, then finds a seat in the corner of the C-shape formed by the tables. She scans the other students quickly: mostly women, none look younger than fifty. Quite a few are older than her.

The lecturer walks in at exactly seven. Aging hippie, she sums up as she scans him: scruffy gray hair tied back in a ponytail, unkempt beard, Birkenstocks. A local author, it said in his bio in the course catalog. Published one memoir about his youth in the shadow of a violent father and service in Vietnam, and a few stories in magazines. She'd never heard of him before. She assumes if he were a really good author he wouldn't be teaching here, in continuing ed.

Dan introduces himself briefly and explains that he'll get to the topic of memoir writing soon, but first he wants to talk a little bit about this issue of documentary creative writing. Ilana opens up the new notebook she bought for the class, takes out a pen, and writes as fast as she can. To this day it's hard for her to write cursive in English. Some of the students who are older than her, she notices, also write with pen and paper. The others type swiftly on laptops or iPads.

"What do we mean by 'writing that is creative but not fictional?'" Dan asks. Some of the students excitedly offer examples of well-known memoirs. Ilana writes down a few names to check later. "Let's talk about memoir," he continues, "What is the difference between a memoir and an autobiography?"

The students look uncertain. She's not sure either. "Autobiography is more objective," someone tries, "memoir is from your own personal perspective." The teacher nods, as though

he's considering the answer. Ilana is accustomed to the way people never contradict each other in this country, never saying outright, "That's wrong." All it takes is a skeptical nod, a tilt of the head, to hint that the speaker is off the mark. It took her so many years to understand this. Sometimes she's not sure she does to this day.

"Autobiography is a whole life," someone says, "memoir can be only about one period."

"Good, excellent point," the teacher praises. "You're right. A person can only write one autobiography, but endless memoirs."

How many memoirs could she write? At least three. About her childhood. About her youth. About the early years in America.

"Memoir is different from autobiography because it's writing memories," another woman offers.

The teacher looks pleased. As if he's been waiting just for this. "Memoir doesn't come from *memory*," he warns, "it comes from *memorandum*. You don't sit there and call up recollections, but rather remind other people – you make them remember."

She quickly writes that down. It's as if they were reading her mind. She has an urgent need to remind people. To write about herself. Pieces of her life, so they are not forgotten, even though it's not like anyone else is going to read what she writes. Who would possibly be interested? Still, it bothers her that all this will be gone when she is, pass from the world without leaving a trace. It's important for her to remind people that there was a woman, Ilana Drori, now Ilana Goldstein. That she was born and raised in Israel, educated there, served in the army, moved to America, got married, had children, raised them, taught Hebrew at the university. If she doesn't write it, who will remember the house she grew up in? Two rooms, with a balcony and a hallway and a red roof, like a child's drawing. The thick steam in the tiny bathroom, where they heated water on a wood-burning stove. The intoxicating smell in the kitchen when her mother kneaded dough for challah and cinnamon and chocolate babkas on Friday afternoons. The brown sofa that was opened up every night to a double bed in the living room, leaving no room to move.

Who will remember the red-hot color of the loamy earth, the downy softness of the acacia flowers in spring, the eye-stinging squirt from an unripe orange in early autumn?

Who will remember foods long-gone from the world: wide egg-noodles with cream cheese, sugar and cinnamon; frozen bacala, battered and fried; chocolate spread that Mom used to make out of margarine and some carefully rationed sugar and cocoa?

Who will remember Dad, and Mom, and Grandma Leah?

It will all be forgotten if she doesn't write it. The deep scar on her leg from when she was playing tag and ran into a sprinkler. The pat on her head from the President of Israel when she was chosen to hand him flowers on his visit to school. The paralyzing flutters when she got on a plane for the first time, on her way to her big adventure – a year teaching in America. Who could have known that she would not return?

The teacher addresses the class. People talk about themselves and what they want to write. One woman wants to tell her grandchildren about her move from India to the United States. Someone else says he signed up for this class to finally write about his years as a prison social worker; he retired two months ago. Early retirement, he stresses, even though Ilana thinks he looks older than her. A woman with straightened hair the color of ripened wheat, one of the younger women in class, smiles flatteringly and says she has nothing to write: nothing interesting has happened to her. "I married my college boyfriend, had two kids, stayed home with them until they went to school, went back to school, got my Master's in information science, worked at the university library, got divorced... I haven't done anything."

A thin smile appears on the teacher's lips, and it widens. He seems to have been expecting this as well. He tells a lengthy anecdote from the life of a well-known Irish-American writer who became famous thanks to his memoirs of an impoverished childhood of hunger with a neglectful mother and an alcoholic father. "A student of his told him once: 'You had something to write: you had a hard, sad life. I just worked in a boring job for thirty years, got married, had children, got divorced, and that's that, life is over.' You know what he told that student?" the teacher asks "My friend, you've just told me a truly tragic life story. Much sadder than mine!"

Their assignment for next week is to write a few paragraphs on a topic of their choice. She wonders which language to write in: directly in English, or first Hebrew and then translate, with Shelley's help? Her English isn't good enough, but her Hebrew suddenly feels stale too. She has no trouble reading or talking in either language, but writing is difficult in both. She types the words that keep darting around her mind again:

It wasn't a very good time for Hebrew.

Why does she write that? She wants to preserve earlier memories, not write about the present. And besides, she doesn't know how to continue. Forty-five years outside of Israel, and she has no language.

7

In November the semester settles into a comfortable routine. The upset of low enrollment has passed. Like news of a serious illness: after the initial shock, one grows accustomed. This is the situation. This is what one lives with. She even takes pleasure in the intimate Beginners Hebrew group. There is more time to review the material, more leeway for students to talk about themselves. She sees little of Yoad. He is immersed in his affairs, she in hers. She hears from Miriam that he gave an "excellent" lecture at the comparative literature colloquium. Time and memory in Heidegger, or something like that: "It's too bad you weren't there!"

She gives Miriam a forced smile and does not admit that she never even knew about the lecture. She's not on the comparative literature mailing list, and Yoad obviously did not invite her. And if he had? A superfluous question. Because he hadn't. Why would he? They never even run into each other. She doesn't sit in on faculty meetings. They teach at different times – language classes are held early in the morning, his seminars are in the afternoons and evenings. So she is surprised when he turns up at her office one day without warning. "Am I disturbing you?" he asks, standing in the doorway, "can I talk to you for a few minutes?"

"Of course, of course, come in," she replies warmly. So he finally understands what she's been trying to explain to him from the beginning: they are a team. He can't go around as if he's alone in the world.

"Sit down," she says, gesturing at the chair students sit on when they come to see her with their Hebrew questions, but Yoad stays standing: what he has to say will only take a couple of minutes. She notices that his eyes are scanning every corner of her office: the books on the shelves, mostly text books but also quite a few Hebrew novels that she's acquired over the years; DVDs of Israeli films and new series she likes to show the students, especially at advanced

levels; and a few old video tapes, long unused since no one has a VCR anymore. She should throw them out, but she doesn't have the heart to do it.

Yoad looks at a stack of papers on her desk. She was just going over them when he came in. "What's this?" he says, pulling one out, "What on earth is this?" He holds the page up and reads the Hebrew text aloud, in disbelief: "My Israel, Your Israel / We all Love the country." He goes on to the next poem and reads it in a deliberately childish voice, grammar mistakes and all: "My Vacation in Israel, by Aliza Wasserman, Schechter Day School, Cleveland. Do you want nice vacation? Come to Israel! Do you want a tasty food? Come to Israel! Warmest sun, beach and sea, come be happy, you will see – It's good in Israel!" Yoad's expression is somewhere between fascination and revulsion, the way one might behold a fat, hairy tarantula. "What on earth is this?"

She briefly explains: a Hebrew poetry contest for students at Jewish schools around America. "These kids study Hebrew seriously, reading and writing. It's unbelievable what they can do. I wish our students..."

"Unbelievable," Yoad concurs.

"I can show you more if you'd like..." She's been judging the competition for twenty years, since the day it was established. This year they asked if she could suggest another judge, after Carmella from Bloomington had passed away, poor woman. They hinted that someone young might be good. Perhaps she had an idea? She'd thought about it but said she was sorry, she had no one.

"I wanted to talk to you about last week's class," Yoad surprises her by saying. "In Advanced Hebrew."

"Yes?"

"Dan Cohen is in my Heidegger seminar."

It takes her a moment to connect the dots. Of course, Daniel. The new student, the one whose father is Israeli. Great! It's good that he's taking classes with them both. That's how you build a program.

"What were you teaching them about the Gaza war?" There is latent aggression in his voice. Ilana has no idea what he's talking about. "Gaza? War?"

"Dan told me you read a newspaper article. Something about names."

After some effort, she finally grasps it. “Oh, that! But why war? Here, take a look.” She takes out the issue of *Yanshuf* newspaper, which she reads to the students from; it’s all that’s left since they shut down *Beginners’ News*. She quickly opens up the oversized pages – it’s been years since anyone’s printed newspapers like that – and shows him the article: “The most common names in Israel: Yosef, Ori and Eitan for boys; Tamar, Noa and Shira for girls.” They both read together for a moment, she with her reading glasses, he with his stylish frames held up. Yoad concentrates, and a victorious look comes over his face: “There!” He points, as if he’s caught her red-handed.

One short passage suggests that the popularity of the name ‘Eitan,’ which was not even in the top ten last year, stems from the name of the operation in Gaza a year and a half ago, *Tzuk Eitan*—“Protective Edge.”

“But what’s the problem?” She fails to understand.

“If I have to explain to you what the problem is, then we’re both in trouble,” Yoad decrees.

“Seriously, I don’t understand...”

“Just imagine,” he says with dripping mockery, “that in German class on campus the teacher read the students an innocent article about a historian who digs through archives and finds that in 1942 there was a jump in the number of German babies named Friedrich, as a result of Operation Barbarossa.”

“But Yoad,” she says, stunned, “how can you even...”

“And I’m not even mentioning the fact that the most common name in Israel doesn’t even appear here—why would it? After all, it’s Mohammed. Never mind. I just wanted to tell you that I find it unacceptable.”

“What?”

“This sort of content. Have a good day.”

Before she can react, he walks out. And perhaps that’s for the best – she was close to an outburst. She’s been here for forty years, and no has ever interfered in her teaching. This is her fiefdom. It’s small, but it’s hers. Perhaps it’s a pity she didn’t say anything to him right then and there about her autonomy, so he doesn’t go thinking he can establish facts on the ground... She wonders if she should complain to someone, but who? Robert? He won’t intervene. And she certainly doesn’t want him thinking she’s in a sensitive position vis-à-vis Yoad, what with the low enrollment and all. Simon Herschensohn? No. He’s a historian. What does this have to do

with him? Yes, Hebrew is autonomous, that's always been her advantage, but now she suddenly lacks a shield, a powerful patron, just when she needs it most.

When Barak comes for Thanksgiving she can't stop complaining about Yoad. Over and over again she tells him every detail of the saga since the beginning of the year, like a middle school teacher analyzing a short story: exposition, conflict, denouement... She has no one else to tell. Shelley already knows the whole thing by heart. Barak listens, but by the second day of his visit he seems to be losing patience. Like his father, he won't say a word, but she knows that wandering look, the droopy eyes. His head is somewhere else. To her surprise, Barak asks: "Why are you getting so angry, in fact?"

Now she is angry at having to explain this to him. "What do you mean? For him to come here like that, condescending to everyone, like it's beneath him..." She starts telling him again about the synagogue club, about Adina Levinger...

Barak cuts her off. He's already heard it. "Okay, so he's a putz. We get it. So what? Do you know how many putzes the world is full of?"

"And that stuff he said about Barbarossa... I thought I was going to explode! Such chutzpah!"

"Ima, you see the old folks at your synagogue. Young Jews in America are sick of your generation, which defends Israel at any cost no matter what it does."

"That's not true!" she protests. "I absolutely do not defend Israel at any cost. On the contrary, I am very critical, especially in recent years. It's not right what they're doing in the territories. But to compare it with Nazi Germany..."

"Calm down," Barak says, "he didn't say Israel is like Nazi Germany."

"Then what did he mean with Barbarossa? You tell me? Hah? Operation Barbarossa – do you even know what that is?"

She is already regretful. She'd so looked forward to Barak's visit, and now she was bickering with him as though he were Yoad, getting annoyed at him for failing to immediately stand by her, insulted that he didn't unconditionally vindicate her. She would like to hug him, the way she used to, when he was her little boy and he'd run up to her with tears if he scraped his knee or someone hit him. She wants to talk to him, heart to heart, to ask what's going on, why he doesn't tell her anything about himself. It's okay that he's not married, but how could she live

with not knowing anything about his life? Does he have girlfriends—or maybe boyfriends? She thinks back to what Gila said—but no. It's not like that. She does know Barak a little, after all.

"Let's separate the emotional issues from the practical problem," Barak suggests. "What exactly did he tell you?"

She repeats the words, which still stab at her: "*It's unacceptable, this sort of content*. Such chutzpah! *He* finds it unacceptable? Who is he, anyway..."

Barak is unimpressed. "All right. Fine. So it's unacceptable to him. That's his right. Is he your boss?"

"That's not exactly how it works. But..." But for forty years no one has dared interfere in what she teaches. Not Bruce, not Tamar. No one.

"Is he your employer?"

"No."

"Do you have to report to him about your performance?"

"No."

"Does he have the authority to fire you?"

"No..." In fact she's not sure. But Robert does. And Yoad has influence on Robert...

"Has he interfered in your class since then? Said anything else?"

"No," she admits.

"Then move on. Why are you making a big deal out of it? Deal with it and move on."

"But..."

"You've been too spoiled at that university," Barak declares. "You have no idea what it's like in the real world. What kind of shits are everywhere. What asshole bosses.

Her child looks tired and harried. What's eating at him? Which boss is mistreating him? He never tells her anything.

8

Chanukah comes early, at the beginning of December. She prepares her class materials. Kosher enough for Mr. Bergman-Harari? she wonders acerbically. No Maccabees. No evil Antiochus. The few against the many. Just a magazine article about donuts and their Israeli equivalent—*sufganiyot*. It always amuses her students to learn that in Israel the symbol of the holiday is a jelly donut, not latkes.

In the good years she used to invite the whole class over to light candles. She would stand in the kitchen frying hundreds of latkes, served with sour cream and applesauce. She made *sufganiyot* too. Little ones, filled with plum jam and dusted with powdered sugar. From a quick yogurt batter, like her mother's. Barak and Yael would run around among the students, enjoying the commotion. Now she and Shelley light the first candle alone and eat sweet potato latkes with sour cream and chive dip, a recipe she learned from Tamar. She remembers that she'd wanted to buy Chanukah gifts for Tamar's kids, but it was too late: she wouldn't have time to mail them.

The approaching winter break lifts her spirits. She needs the time-out. She and Shelley are debating whether to visit Yael in Oregon or perhaps get a few days of rest in Florida. They need to warm up a little. Yael announces that they're going on vacation to Hawaii, where Jeff's friend owns an organic farm, so Ilana and Shelley rent a beach apartment in Miami. She's always loved Miami. She doesn't mind the way people make fun of it, like it's one big retirement home. Back when they were forty-five or fifty, it was completely obvious that they weren't those kind of people. They were young. Now she sees fewer and fewer vacationers in their eighties and nineties, like she remembers from years ago. Most of them are her age now. She and Shelley take a walk on the beach every morning, and again at sunset.

"How would you feel about moving here?" Shelley asks out of the blue one day.

She looks at him. "Are you serious?"

"Why not?"

"What about a library? Where will you write?"

Shelley smiles but doesn't say anything.

Before going back to school she squeezes in a trip to Chicago, to visit Bruce at his assisted living home. Bruce looks thinner and more muscular than she remembers him. Yes, he explains with a grin, he swims every morning and then goes to the gym. "You should see it. Come on, I'll give you a tour." But his wife Chana looks absent, with untidy hair, now entirely white, and a skeletal body that seems to have lost its muscle tone. She uses a walker and apologizes: she's had two falls in the past month. It's a good thing there's carpeting here, not hardwood like in their old house. It was a miracle she only suffered a few bruises. Chana sits with them for a while and then goes to lie down. She apologizes again: she's very tired.

"She didn't sleep well last night," Bruce says, lowering his voice, after she leaves. He serves coffee and cookies himself.

Ilana feels a little bad bothering him with her troubles, given everything he's dealing with, but who else does she have left? Besides, other people's troubles can be a worthy distraction from your own. As she well knows. She regales him with the entire history, right from the beginning, since Yoad arrived for his first job interview, almost a year ago: "And there were two lovely candidates, from Brandeis and Bar-Ilan, but they had to go and choose him. It was clear that he was the preferred candidate right from the start. Paradoxically, the worse he treated them the more they wanted him." Then she lets loose: "From day one he acted as if he was doing them a favor by even agreeing to teach there, and that was what made him even more desirable, even though everyone knows it's a total fiction – I mean, if he'd had a better offer he would have taken it ages ago. This is obviously the best he could get, but everyone treats him like God's gift..." She goes on and on, not sparing Bruce a single detail. The boring lecture that she couldn't understand a word of. The way Yoad called the wonderful synagogue members "a gaggle of old ladies." Adina Levinger, Operation Protective Edge... She also mentions the low enrollment in Hebrew this year. She has nothing to be ashamed of with Bruce.

Bruce listens attentively. Focused, hearing every word. That alone starts to make her feel better. When she finishes talking he comforts her: "We've been through worse, you have no need to worry. You know those characters. He'll stick around for two or three years, until he gets a job in a big city, and then he'll be out of here as fast as his legs can carry him. I guarantee it. Want to bet?"

9

When she goes back to teaching in January she learns that two more students have dropped out of Beginners Hebrew and one from Advanced – Daniel, who took Yoad's seminar. She tells herself it's probably just a coincidence, but she cannot avoid the suspicion that Yoad had some influence. Either way, she's never had such low enrollment. In the fall she'd consoled herself that it couldn't get worse: next semester would be better.

When she runs into Robert, she prepares to launch into a defense, but to her relief he says nothing about the enrollment. There's something much more worrying on his mind: "Yoad is looking for another job."

"Really?" She tries to look concerned, but has trouble hiding her glee. Just as Bruce predicted. He's so smart!

"He went to the MLA conference for interviews this month and I heard he has two on-campus interviews in February, one at Maryland and one somewhere in New York."

"New York," she repeats. He obviously wants to move back there.

"Upstate New York," Robert clarifies. "Binghamton, I think."

She has no response. Anything she says will give her away.

"I've already talked to the dean. We'll try and do something. Push his sabbatical forward by a year, or lighten his teaching load, give him a raise..."

It's the first time she's heard of something like this happening. She's used to the way things work here – bring us another job offer and get anything you can think of. No job offer – stay here forever as a low-ranking adjunct at starvation wages, like her. But to offer Yoad something in advance, when he doesn't even have anything else—what sort of an idea is that?

"Preemptive offer," Robert explains. He looks self-satisfied. "Do you have any ideas? What can we offer him? What might increase the chances of him staying?"

Robert is flattering her, she knows. Trying to be ingratiating, to show that he seeks her counsel, that her opinion matters. Even if she did have an idea, she's better off keeping quiet. She wants Yoad to leave. But it's important, especially now, that she show Robert that she's cooperating, being a team player.

"Maybe an office in comparative literature?" she suggests. "The way it is now, he might feel like he's not really part of them..."

Robert enthuses: "Great idea, Ilana! I'll go and see Jay about it today."

She feels very pleased with herself. She showed Robert that she cares, and Yoad will be out of her hair.

Yoad seems to be in a spirit of goodwill. On the rare occasions when she sees him, he has a dreamy, tender expression, as if he's already long gone. He even smiles back at her slightly when they run into each other. "I hear you're going to Maryland," she can't resist saying, "best of luck to you. I'm keeping my fingers crossed."

Yoad seems a little surprised. "Thanks," he blurts.

Yes, she's keeping her fingers crossed, praying he gets the job and leaves. And then they'll reopen the job posting, or go back to Rakefet or Karen... She stops herself: don't put the cart before the horse.

Racheli from the Israeli Consulate calls her. There's an Israeli writer visiting the area. She'd be happy to do a campus visit, meet local readers, talk to the students. "Could you arrange that, Ilana?"

Of course she can. Racheli knows that. They've been working together for a long time. They cooperate a lot. The Jewish Studies Center has funds earmarked for bringing Israeli culture to campus. All she has to do is get Yoad's signature – after all, he's a faculty member, she's just an adjunct. She decides to go to his office. If she emails him it could take three days before he answers. His door is shut. She always keeps hers open when she's in her office. The students know they can always come in to talk. Still, she knocks.

She finds him eating sushi in a disposable container at his desk. The room is almost empty. Only a few unpacked boxes in the corner, several library books on the shelves, and a poster of a balding, mustached middle-aged man with sharp features, in black and white. She assumes it's Heidegger.

"Listen, I don't want to bother you, I just have a formality. We have the budget, all I need is your support. If you'd like, I can write the letter and you just send it in your name, or..."

Yoad listens distractedly. No problem, he shrugs. It's fine with him. But she'll need to handle the whole visit. It's not his thing. And besides, he's very busy.

"Yes, yes," she quickly agrees and tamps down a smile – she knows exactly what he's busy with. "Thanks a lot then, Yoad. You know it's very important to me that we keep having Hebrew culture here, and Racheli from the Consulate..."

"Wait," Yoad cuts her off. All at once he stiffens, straightens up. "The Consulate?"

"Yes..."

"Listen, if the Consulate is involved then I'm not willing to take part in it."

She cannot believe her ears. “What?”

Yoad swallows the last piece of sushi, puts the chopsticks and napkin in the tray, snaps on the clear plastic lid and tosses it into the trash can in the corner – for a moment she thinks he’s throwing it at her, and she pulls back instinctively.

“I’m not prepared to work with the Consulate of the State of Israel,” he says when he finishes chewing.

“But why?” She doesn’t understand. “Because of the political situation?” she tries after a moment.

“Yes, because of the political situation.” Yoad pronounces the words derisively, as if he’s talking to a slow child.

“I don’t understand this,” she says, more to herself than to Yoad. “You’re critical of the government, you disagree with its policies, I get that, but what do you mean you won’t work with the Consulate? It’s the Consulate of the State of Israel, not of the government. We don’t have another consulate...” We don’t have another country, she thinks, but she doesn’t say that. Who is she to talk? She’s lived in America for forty-five years. “You can’t decide just like that, unilaterally, that you’re not working with them...”

“Can’t I?” Yoad’s voice contains contempt and a show of power: of course he can.

She doesn’t care about the Consulate anymore, or about the culture budget. Only justice interests her now. “But how can you... And if you go that route, then why are you willing to teach in an American university after what they did to the Indians? Did you know there were tribes who lived right here, right where this campus is built? Did you?”

Yoad sits quietly, with the same scornful look of pity on his face that he had when she asked why he was working on that Nazi, Heidegger.

“And anyway,” she says, unable to let it go, “why does everyone always pounce on Israel? Other countries do things that are a hundred times worse – look at what’s going on in Syria, or Egypt—those people would be thrilled to have the conditions and freedom of expression that Israeli Arabs get!”

Yoad still doesn’t bother answering, but she doesn’t care. She can’t stop now.

“And why only look at the bad things? Show me another country that in fifty, sixty years has produced that quality of science, agriculture, medicine, culture... That kind of creativity! Artists, writers, Nobel prizes – how many Nobel winners are there in Jordan or Egypt?”

She is beginning to regret her tirade. Even to her own ears, she sounds like a schoolteacher. But what can she do? It infuriates her that young people like Yoad don't understand that Israel is nothing less than a miracle. They take it for granted, they cannot see that there was a hairsbreadth between its existence and... God forbid what would have happened if that country did not exist.

"I really want to understand," she says slowly, measuredly, "what it is that bothers you so much. What made you decide that you won't work with the Consulate? Is it the territories? The settlements?"

Yoad seems to be wondering whether to reply seriously. "I was mulling it over for a while, but the last straw was in the summer, with Gaza."

"Operation Protective Edge?" She remembers the newspaper article. "That really was horrible, for both sides, but..."

"But what?" Yoad seems eager for a fight now. "Two thousand casualties on one side, seventy-two on the other. Five hundred children dead... That government murders children in cold blood!"

"Yoad..." She cannot avoid the berating tone, as if she's his teacher. "You're ignoring the context. It's not as if the government got up one day and started bombing Gaza. We withdrew, we gave them the Gaza Strip, for peace..."

"We gave them the Gaza Strip!" Yoad imitates her. "We put them under siege, is what we did. Two million people in prison. Under inhumane conditions."

"We withdrew," she repeats, sticking to the facts—surely he can't disagree. "And they fired at us ceaselessly!"

"They fired a few rockets. In Gaza whole neighborhoods were razed. Children..."

"But they shoot at us too!" she insists. "And believe me, if they had the means Israel has, they'd shoot a lot more. And there were children killed on our side too—"

"One child," Yoad corrects her.

"But they aim to kill civilians," she argues. "We don't. If they do get killed, it's not intentional..."

Yoad gives her a disdainful look and says she's proving his argument herself: Israel doesn't do enough to avoid hitting civilians. It doesn't care about Palestinian lives.

“But they use civilians as human shields!” she insists. “It just shows you who those people are...”

Why is she arguing with him? She has no chance of winning. The man is utterly blind. She uses all her strength to bite her tongue. She didn’t come here to argue, but to get something. “All right, let’s not fight. I just need your signature, that’s it.”

Yoad glares at her: What have they been talking about all this time? What did he waste his time for? “I told you, I’m not collaborating with the Consulate.”

“But it’s just a formality...”

“I will not act against my conscience. Have a nice day.”

10

She cannot calm down. Over and over she repeats to Shelley the words they’d exchanged, analyses the progression, justifies her behavior—as if anyone were doubting her. She has no one besides Shelley. She’s even embarrassed around Adina. And the ladies from the Hebrew book club. But why? It’s obvious that she is in the right. That Yoad is so extreme as to be blind. Yet still, she knows, the fact that she wasn’t able to maintain a professional relationship with the new professor shows her in a negative light. No matter how much she explains and makes excuses, the dirt will stick to her too.

All she can do is hope that Yoad gets one of the jobs he applied for and relieves her and this college from his presence next year. She doesn’t even care what happens to the position. As far as she’s concerned they can do away with it and there won’t be a Hebrew professor, so long as she doesn’t have to work with Yoad Bergman-Harari any longer.

February is relatively mild this year. Everyone mentions it in their small talk. But she finds this winter difficult, especially the darkness. She remembers Shelley’s suggestion that they move to Florida. Maybe it’s not such a bad idea. When he brought it up she thought it was madness. What does she have there? She doesn’t know anyone. But what does she have here, she now thinks as she walks from her class to the car under a gloomy sky, almost dark in the early

afternoon. Who does she have here? A few friends from synagogue? Bruce is gone. Tamar is gone. Her kids aren't here either.

At the beginning of March, Robert catches up with her and reveals, in a quiet voice, that Yoad did not get the Maryland job. "He doesn't know it himself yet. It's just that I have an acquaintance on the committee there and he told me yesterday that they offered it to someone else." He rubs his hands together gleefully. "Now we just have to find out about Binghamton. Although that's a far smaller problem," he adds with a satisfied grin. "I don't want to count our chickens before they hatch, as they say, but I talked to Richard and I think it's going to work out..."

Her heart sinks. So he is staying. At least she can gloat and see him humiliated. She resists asking Yoad if he's heard anything from Maryland, but she doesn't get the chance anyway. If he happens to run into her, he walks past quickly, ignoring her, perhaps only pretending that he didn't see her.

Robert continues to update her. As it turns out, Yoad did make a big splash at Binghamton. "They really want him. I don't know what's going to happen. We'll have to work very hard to keep him."

"He probably prefers New York," she comments.

Robert gives a dismissive wave. "*Upstate* New York. I've been there. It's the pits. The city's not bad, actually, a college town – although ours is much better," he boasts, as if she's the one he's trying to persuade, "but the isolation! Three and a half hours from New York, two and a half from Rochester, even to Cornell it's an hour... If he had an offer from Cornell then we really would have a problem, but Binghamton? You have no idea what it's like there. Look it up on the map someday: it's called New York, but really it's stuck half-way between rural Pennsylvania and the Canadian Prairies."

She strains to pick up some of his excitement and not give away her true feelings, but she can't resist: "For us, of course, it's one thing, but for him... Maybe he'd be better off there. Professionally, I mean."

Robert waves his hand again. "I've looked into it, you think I haven't? I've done my research. He'd have no like-minded people there. There's no serious German literature specialist, no Jewish Studies center like ours, just a few individuals scattered around here and there. I hope he'll have the sense to know what's good for him."

She nods and also hopes that Yoad will decide he'd be better off somewhere else. Only after saying goodbye to Robert does she realize, with some relief, that once again he'd said nothing about the low enrollment.

For some reason, Robert insists on updating her on the negotiations with Yoad. As if she were his confidante. As if she were just as interested as he is in Yoad staying. He informs her triumphantly that he's managed to get Yoad a raise. "Great," she says, attempting a smile, although inside she seethes: she's been slaving away here for forty years, busting her butt – she's not ashamed to say it – and no one ever tried to get her a raise. And now that little pisher, half her age, is going to make twice as much as she does. A week later Robert reports that an office in Comparative Literature has been arranged: "What a brilliant idea, Ilana! Great work!" Now he's going to talk with Yoad himself. That's the best strategy, in his experience. He'll ask him directly: What will it take to keep you here? "You won't believe the things people ask for," Robert explains, perhaps having detected her dubious expression. He says it's the trivial-sounding things that can tip the scales: a season pass for college football, a reserved parking spot. "Although, if it's a parking spot he wants, that might be a real problem..." His face falls again. "It'll be easier to get him another raise."

She nods, and prays Yoad makes unreasonable demands, the kind they'll have no choice but to reject, and he'll be so offended that he'll leave.

"Maybe early tenure?" she tries, hoping Robert will dismiss the idea—so preposterous! How could they justify that?—but Robert doesn't flinch: "I thought of that. He has a publisher for his Heidegger book. It's not unprecedented for someone to get tenure based on an unpublished book..."

All she can do now is wait. Wait and see. She can't influence the outcome anyway. It's hard for her: she's always been bad at waiting patiently. She has to do something, otherwise she goes crazy. So she pours even more effort than usual into her teaching. But she is forced to admit that four students don't give her as much work as fifteen. She could have written her memoirs, as she'd planned. The writing class is over, and she didn't sign up for the spring semester because the class ended up being somewhat disappointing. But the words don't come to her. She still can't decide what language to write in. Hebrew is too far away. English too unobtainable.

While making dinner one evening, she notices the campus newspaper that Shelley picks up every day on his way to the library. Usually it ends up in the trash can, unread. But something in

the main headline, which is larger than usual, catches her eye – three letters: B, D, S – and she sits down at the dining table and reads the article closely. Perhaps it’s a mistake. She once thought it had arrived on campus, when she saw a sign with the letters ‘BDS’ and her heart sank, but it turned out to be an ad for a store called Black Diamond Sport. This time, however, it’s the real thing, exactly what she’d feared: Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions. She’d heard about these sort of things happening in Boston, San Francisco, New York—but here?

“Shelley!” she calls. “Shelley, can you come here?”

They turn on the computer together to try and figure out what it’s all about. Shelley sits at the screen, interpreting for her: “At this point it looks like they’ve just sent a petition to the university, asking them to boycott Israeli products in the cafeteria and pull out from funds that invest in Israel. But it could snowball. At Stanford and Berkeley the student senate passed resolutions to boycott Israel, and even though it’s only a symbolic act – it’s not the university senate, God forbid – still, morally speaking... And the affect it has on Jewish students...”

“Who would sign such a thing?” Ilana is astonished.

Shelley sighs. “You’d be surprised. Quite a few people. Even Jews...”

“That can’t be!”

“Let’s find out.” He scrolls down to the list of signatories. Most of the names she doesn’t recognize, apart from one superstar English literature professor, and Claus Hoffer, a professor of German literature, which particularly enrages her: Him! What right does he have...

“Look,” Shelley says, pointing to the screen, and there it is, right in front of her eyes: Yoad Bergman-Harari, Department of Middle Eastern Studies.

Nothing, it seems, should have surprised her after their last run-in, but still she is stunned. She reruns the events of the past few months: at first she thought he was just a snob, looking down on the university, missing New York. Then it occurred to her that he was a leftist, of course, like all academics, and slightly anti-religious too, like all Israelis—that face he made during *Kiddush* at her home, and his refusal to talk at the synagogue. But it never occurred to her that he was simply a self-hating Jew. The idea that he would sign that petition! But no. It’s not self-hatred. Yoad Bergman-Harari is very, very fond of himself. He just hates Israel. Simple as that.

“We have to do something,” she says to Shelley, “what can we do?”

Shelley thinks for a moment. “A counter petition. That’s how it works. At Stanford a hundred professors signed a counter petition, Jews and non-Jews. These things have power.”

She and Adina sit up till almost midnight writing their counter-petition. Shelley chimes in, offers advice. Despite her enormous anger—at Yoad, at the petition—Ilana enjoys spending the evening with the two of them, with a sense of mission. The next day they send the petition to everyone they know, but she also does some groundwork, writes personal notes, calls people up, talks with all the professors who belong to her synagogue. The responses are positive, of course, they all want to help, but she is disappointed to discover that the original petition does not arouse the fervor she’d expected. Some nod and say it’s nothing new, that’s how it is. Others cool her zeal (“It’s intolerable! A professor of Hebrew and Jewish literature supporting a boycott of Israel!”) by reminding her about America’s famous freedom of speech, the First Amendment... “You know, we don’t love it either, but it’s his right. It’s freedom of expression.” Most infuriating are the ones who refuse to sign because they “don’t get into politics.” Bleeding hearts. They’re the reason this battle will be lost.

She tries to rally her students to do something. To pass a resolution of support for Israel in the student senate. At least send a letter to the campus newspaper. But her lackluster students just give her yawny looks and are clearly not eager for a fight – they haven’t even woken up properly: it’s 10 a.m.

Finally, she knocks on Yoad’s door and tells him what she thinks about this whole business. “It’s not okay!” she scolds. “You think this is how you’re going to make your colleagues like you? Well, let me tell you from many years of experience: it’s exactly the opposite. No one likes someone who hates himself. And you should also know,” she adds, “that it’s not going to do anything for your tenure. There are lots of professors here who support Israel, Jews and non-Jews, in all sorts of senior positions. People who will sit on your committee. And there are broader considerations, too. Jewish donors to the university who, trust me, you do not want to annoy. If I were you I’d be very careful.”

Yoad’s face has the tormented look of a Christian saint. “My conscience is more important than getting tenure,” he declares, “but thank you very much for your concern about my employment prospects. Please do not fret. I just got offered early tenure.”

She can tell that he is deriving great satisfaction from the expression on her face. “So... Does that mean you’re staying here?”

An enigmatic smile appears on his face. “Depends.”

“On what?”

He shrugs. “All sorts of little things I still have to finalize.”

11

Richard Olson, the Dean of Humanities, gets up when Ilana enters his office, and shakes her hand. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Ilana. I’ve heard so much about you.”

He smiles, and she struggles to overcome her ominous feeling. She’s been teaching here for forty years and no dean has bothered to meet with her before.

“Sit down,” he says. Robert is sitting on the other chair, avoiding eye contact. Now Richard also sheds his slippery, professional mantel and suddenly seems a little awkward. Even though she had her suspicions, she cannot believe it when Richard squirms and underscores that this is nothing personal, of course, on the contrary, they are grateful for her years of teaching, for the wonderful work she’s done, the Hebrew program she built from the ground up. “It’s just that it’s seeming as though Yoad Bergman-Harari will be our professor of Hebrew and Jewish literature for many years to come, and as it’s quite clear that you and he are incompatible” – he tries to sound diplomatic, as though the responsibility is equally shouldered by the two of them – “it would be a pity for you both to be unhappy and create more tension that would rock the boat.” He looks down at the papers on his desk. “I see that you were born in 1948, which means that in any case you’d be with us for two more years, three at the most, so what’s another year earlier or later? As for finances, we can reach an arrangement. The college will consider your circumstances and pay out another two years of social security on your behalf, so that you’ll be eligible for the maximum allowance at age seventy. Which means that in fact, financially speaking, it’s advantageous for you to stop working.”

“And Shelley is retired...”

She turns to look at Robert. Those are his first words.

“You’ll be able to spend more time together,” he clarifies.

No one mentions the low enrollment, but it hangs in the room. Richard insists on shaking her hand again before she leaves. Nancy, his assistant – no one says secretary anymore – will sit down and go over all the details with her. She nods, avoiding Robert's eyes, tries to hurry out but almost trips over her own feet. Only later, in her office, does she understand: this was one of Yoad's conditions for staying. She was one of the little things he had to finalize.

12

There were moments when she considered giving up on the Independence Day celebration. Her last one here. In the end, though, she found the strength. She hadn't missed a single one in forty years—why should she now? She takes out the old poster-boards from the cabinet: thrifty irrigation systems; medical patents; “Start-up Nation.” Pictures she cut out of promotional newsletters and magazines: Lake Kinneret, Mount Hermon, flowers blossoming in the Negev desert, the Ramon Crater. Alone she organizes the table, spreads out a white cloth, decorates with light-blue crepe paper and little flags. She'd brought a portable stereo and her Israeli folk-music CDs: Arik Einstein, Hava Alberstein, Mati Caspi. Newer singers, too: Rita, Rami Kleinstein, Ehud Banai.

She stands at her improvised stall with Noah Sturman and Shira Shlein, who took her class two years ago and will graduate in three weeks. Few people stop to take a handful of *Bissli* and other snacks. They're not allowed to serve *Bamba* anymore. That's another recent development: peanut allergies.

The stall across from theirs is bustling. She's not sure exactly what it is. The signs are jumbled on top of each other: Remember Nakba Day. Support Palestine. Jews and Arabs for Peace. People stop to look around, and sometimes argue. The students staffing the stall are welcoming, explaining their positions patiently, handing out baklava and other sweets, as well as pamphlets in English and Arabic. Ilana instinctively dislikes the red kaffiyeh that one of them wears around his neck, and the flag waving above them in red, green and black. She knows: it's the PLO flag. Yoad Bergman-Harari stops by and is welcomed with hugs. Now she recognizes

Daniel behind the stall, the boy who was in her class at the beginning of the year, and Alaa, Robert and Heba's son.

When she gets home she finds a message from Yael: Call me. She hesitates. She barely has the strength. And who can guarantee that she'll be able to hold back the tears? Still, how often does Yael ask her to call? She always has to chase her down.

Yael picks up immediately, as though she's been waiting by the phone. For the second time this week, Ilana can scarcely believe her ears. Just like with Richard, but this time it's the opposite: "Are you serious? Twins?"

Yael apologizes for not telling her sooner. She's already had a few pregnancies end badly.

"Oh, Yaeli, I'm so..." The word 'happy' does not do justice to her emotions. Elated. Relieved. Fearful, too. She just wants it to end well this time. For everything to be all right. Celia just told her that Jon and Kayla took the little boy to a child development clinic. Even they finally realized they couldn't bury their head in the sand anymore.

13

Nothing is forever, she comforts herself. Not her. Not Yoad Bergman-Harari. Not this college. Not even Hebrew. There were some good years. She should be happy for them. And there will be more. There will be grandchildren. She will go to see them for long visits. She'll help Yael. Now she'll have the time. In December they'll rent an apartment in Florida, somewhere inexpensive. They'll no longer have to suffer through these winters. Shelley can travel with the books he needs. She'll work on her memoir. She'll have time, finally. She'll write about the good years. To remind people of them. So they aren't forgotten. People should know that there was once a Hebrew program here. Full classes. That she taught hundreds, maybe even thousands, of students. They read and wrote from right to left. They struggled with their *reish* and *khet* sounds and the *schwas*. They took two full years, and some went on for a third. They read poems by Amir Gilboa and Rachel and Zelda, and stories by Amos Oz and Etgar Keret, and even abridged versions of Agnon. She will write about how she came here, young and full of enthusiasm, to teach for a year, to get a taste of life in America. It hadn't occurred to her that this was where she would live out her life. She will write about how she met Shelley when she was almost twenty-

seven – not a young girl anymore. About how her landlady decided they had to find her someone and recruited all her friends from Hadassah and from the synagogue to work on it. “He’s not a man with a lot of money, but he has a heart of pure gold,” she told Ilana, who agreed to meet Shelley straight away. Aren’t you sorry to lose a good tenant like me? she asked the landlady when they got engaged, and Pearl Guttberg said that finding a husband for a Jewish girl was a mitzvah worth more than any amount of money. She would write that story. Barak and Yael didn’t know it. She used to be embarrassed. She didn’t want them to know that’s how they’d met. But now she didn’t care. She was more afraid of the story being forgotten. And the twins might want to read it when they grew up. So she would write about her childhood, about the early years, about how she’d raised their mother, Yael. How she taught Hebrew. She would write about her last year at the college, about everything that had happened before she became their grandmother.

She is suddenly filled with a sense of urgency, and she turns on the computer and opens the document she’s been agonizing over for months, which contains one single sentence: *It wasn’t a very good time for Hebrew.*

Now she knows she will write in English. She wants to remind people of things, after all, not just reminisce. Who will read it if she writes in Hebrew? It’s important to her that Yael and Barak be able to read it. And that Yael’s children can read it one day. Shelley will help her if she has trouble. She’s not embarrassed around him. Besides, her English isn’t that bad. And in any case, it’s not a good time for Hebrew.