

Pardes Hannah, Israel

She sat next to me, on the rocking chair in the living room; the same rocking chair she was sitting in the first time I met her, at Ricky and Isar's place. I remember it well—she was gorgeous, striking, and—most of all—calm and happy.

“You're killing me,” I told her now, staring out at the garden.

“You killed me a long time ago.”

“Oh, come on, what do you want from me now?”

The little one was about to get hit in the head by the swing, and the one who just fell off the swing was crying his eyes out. In a second he would get up, let out a roar, chase down the eldest, and punch him.

“I just got back from Ma'ayan's,” she said, then paused, waiting to get my attention.

The little one was now chasing the eldest, screaming. The eldest was laughing and running away.

“They just got back from a year-long trip around the world. They were falling apart when they left, and she says now they're doing great.”

“Okay,” I said.

We had to do something about those kids, but she didn't even see it. Why wasn't she watching? Rather than stare at the wall in front of her, couldn't she have turned her head to stare out at the yard? Even ten years ago, sitting in that rocking chair, she looked too straight ahead. Something about her neck's range of motion seemed problematic to me even back then, but I guess I let it slide because she was so damn pretty and sweet.

“Let's go to Southeast Asia for a year.”

“Don't make me laugh!” the words flew out of my mouth. A smile smeared across my face. A chuckle, even. “A year in Southeast Asia? Have you lost your mind?”

“It's our last chance, don't you get it? We're fading away, wilting away. Stagnant on all fronts.”

Again with that war jargon. Fronts, arenas, have to, must, roll call. It drives me nuts.

“What are you thinking, a *year*? Only crazy people do that kind of thing. I can’t think of a single normal person who does that.”

“It’s interesting that you think you’re normal. You might be *sane*, we could argue about that, but you’re certainly not *normal*. But never mind that. We were thinking we might spend a month or a little longer in Thailand over summer break, right? So I say, let’s make it a year. Let’s save our relationship. Let’s save our marriage. Let’s drop everything and go. Let’s go before who knows where we’ll end up.”

“We were thinking we might spend a month or a little longer in Thailand over summer break? This is the first I’m hearing about it. Maybe you discussed it with yourself, or told me when I was asleep. Besides, why go to extremes? Why make everything stressful? ‘Who knows where we’ll end up’... So things are a little hard, so what? Who prepared you for this life, huh? Who told you everything has to be peachy all the time? Stop being so spoiled!”

“You idiot, I’m trying to do something that could save us, save this family, save these children you love so much, and all you do is mock me!”

They had made peace outside. Now the three little ones were on the swings and the eldest was swinging them so hard that the girl was about to fly to the rooftop.

“How exactly are we supposed to pay for this trip, huh? Where will we get the money for it?” I asked.

“All you care about is money!”

“Maybe I’d care a little less about it if you worked. If you contributed anything. But you haven’t had a job since the day I met you!”

“I don’t work? Me?! You must be blind. Who spent eight consecutive years either pregnant or on maternity leave? Who’s been raising your four children? Who ran your business for five years? Do you have any idea how to issue an invoice? Who’s been carrying this household all these years? Do you even know where the laundry machine is? Where do we keep the kids’ clothes? How about diapers? Fucking Legos? I’ve had it with you!”

And there we go with the crying. Broken breathing, gasping and whimpering. *Maybe I’m an asshole. Maybe she’s right. Why do I always assume I’m right and she’s wrong?* Now her nose was turning red and the hairs inside were hung with droplets, looking as thick as sequoia trees.

“What did I do that was so awful?” she was sobbing. I kept thinking about how Rami would react. How would Rami put a stop to this?

“What did *I* do that was so awful,” I let out a yell. “Huh? What did *I* do? What do you want from me, huh? Huh? Huh?”

She brought her head closer to mine, her pupils as large as ping pong balls. She was about to murder me, but instead of shouting, she whispered, which was even scarier: “This is your last chance. I’m giving you a year to save this marriage. A year without the excuse of making a living and getting writing done and paying rent and all that stress. I want to spend a year in Southeast Asia to save our marriage. It’s either that, or I’m leaving. Your choice!”

The last two words she did shout. All the effort to keep her voice down erupted into a screechy “your choice!”

I met Rami a few days ago. He has a little workshop where he installs stereo systems in cars. From the first moment I laid eyes on him, I could tell he was a whole person. A person who knows what he knows, and whatever he doesn’t know—doesn’t exist. No one chews his head off. He’s got no doubts or scruples. Even when he bends down to install systems, his ass crack doesn’t show. He’s that determined. How would Rami react in this situation?

“Are you setting an ultimatum? I’ve had enough ultimatums, let’s make that clear. No more ultimatums in this house. I won’t go on this deranged trip, or anywhere else, is that clear?”

Then she got up and left, slamming the door behind her. The kids were just coming in. They may have heard her muttering “Moron” under her breath. I can’t be sure.

“Come on, babies, let’s go to the playground. Mom will be back soon. Don’t worry. It’s just pretend. We can play make-believe too. I’m a turtle with a very big shell. How about you? What do you want to be?”

One Week Later

Home from the writing workshop. If I have to read one more text I’m going to kill myself. What’s so hard about writing a story? Beginning, middle, and end. And have the end connected somehow to the beginning. What’s so difficult about that? And

then there are the ones who hang back to talk to me: “Can you give me more specific feedback? I didn’t understand your notes.”

“Never write again, not a single word, even if you’re on a drowning ship and that word happens to be ‘help’. Cool?” That would be my feedback. When I finally got out of the building there were two more lurkers waiting for me there. They wanted to write a script together.

I thought about my wife, our bad relationship, the immense expenses our house required—so immense that even the nice royalties I made on my books couldn’t even cover half of them. That afternoon, I’d gone to the Bris of a close friend’s son. Because I’d just had my car repaired and it cost a fortune I decided to cheap out on the gift, which led me to leave the event wracked with guilt. I’d already sent them a huge bouquet and I knew I’d be enslaved to them from now on. Grandma Shula always said: Those who try to avoid a little pain end up in a lot of pain.

So those guys from the workshop talked to me about their script, and I was about to miss my train to Pardes Hanna, and I had no energy for the train or for Pardes Hanna. We’ve moved five times in ten years but haven’t been able to find our place. A place where we felt good. Felt loved and loving. Felt at home.

I told them their idea sounded great and they almost jumped out of their skin. They were this close to handing me an invitation to the movie premiere. I started walking toward the train station. Everything looked faded, gray, and painful; the people like tired ants on concrete. I used to think I’d go places, become a rich and influential figure, and now the years were ticking by and it wasn’t happening, not even my hope of a spiritual exit—becoming enlightened, calm, all-knowing; something to put my soul in order before it fizzled out completely.

I took the escalator down to the platform. Why did people always stop on the escalator? If the escalator wasn’t there, they’d be walking down the stairs. Announcements were made on the PA system, directing ants to their appropriate tunnels. Then I got a call from Arye, my landlord, a great guy, actually. I’d forgotten to call him and let him know we wanted to extend our lease. We were dying to leave the place, but we had nowhere else to go.

“How are you, Golan?”

“I’m well, Arye. How are you, my good man?”

“At my age they say it can’t get any worse. Listen, Golan, if you want to extend the lease, you need to know next year the rent will be going up to 7,250 shekels.”

“7,250, Arye?”

“Indeed. 7,250.”

“You don’t mean 7,200. You don’t mean 7,300. You mean 7,250.”

“You heard me, Golan.”

I felt myself losing it. He owned six homes that he rented out. He himself lived in an enormous penthouse in northern Tel Aviv. I always paid the rent on time, I took good care of the house. We had an excellent relationship. And he was seventy years old. Why did he need another 4,50 shekels per month?

“You’ll never find a renter who’ll pay that much, Arye. The house will be standing empty. Even the 6,800 I’m paying now is too high for the area.”

“I’ll find someone,” he said. “And I’m in no rush. If it takes a while, it’ll stand empty.”

“But during that time I could be paying you rent, so you’d be losing money.”

“Golan, let me know by Sunday if you want to extend.”

“And if I object to the rent increase, you’ll kick me out? Is that what you’re saying?”

“I’m not kicking you out. I’m raising the rent. You’re welcome to stay.”

I couldn’t believe I’d gifted him one of my books, with an inscription that read, “To Arye, greatest guy in the world.” And this is how he treated me now?

“Arye, you know, I thought I’d be coming to visit you in the retirement home, reading you my books aloud. But now? Go find someone else to spoon feed you oatmeal, you ingrate. Blinded by greed. You’ve got one foot in the grave, old man. What does my 450 shekels a month matter to you? How are you going to leave this world? I’ll tell you. A mouse. Born a mouse, and you’ll die a mouse, you—”

I embarked on an ongoing cursing session, plugging in the best I’d acquired in my years on this planet. At some point he hung up. I was practically shaking with anger. It took me a few moments to settle down and comprehend that in a month’s time I would be homeless. We no longer had a home. I went online. Thirty minutes of browsing clarified just how bad things were. There were no houses for rent in the area, and anyway, we didn’t even want to stick around there, we just didn’t know where we did want to go. And now I’d burned this bridge. After the way I talked to

Arye, we couldn't even stay in our house until we figured things out. What an irresponsible moron I am!

Maybe we should go away for a year after all? The royalties from my books would be enough to let us live like kings. We'd get a year-long break from wondering "Where are we going to live?" A year in which I might stop feeling like a failure at running my own life. And hey, maybe for once in my life I'd do something extreme. Not extreme to others, extreme to me. I called Adi.

"All right, let's go to Southeast Asia for a year."

"What made you change your mind?"

"I want to work on our marriage. On our relationship. Everything you said was right. You're right. I want us to get back what we once had. I want us to laugh together again, to love each other. This trip could do us a world of good. Let's go."

*

We bought the kids some drugs. A tablet for each child. That was the recommendation on the Facebook group "Traveling Families". I also bought a small camera and some speakers, as well as power strips, adapters, cables, and an additional laptop. Factories in China were working overtime to manufacture my purchases.

I went home and saw my kids: a gaggle of children coming home from school with their backpacks. What was I doing to them? How could I pull them out of their routine just because... I didn't even know why. Because of 450 shekels a month? When we told them the news they were actually very excited. Well, those of them who could fathom the meaning anyway, which was basically no one. Our eldest is eight years old. All he understood was that he was going to skip school for a year. We bought them a world map and showed them a made-up route, because we didn't actually have one. "You see, we'll land here," I said, pointing at Thailand. All we knew was that we'd land in Bangkok, go up north for two weeks, then down to Ko Pha-ngan, where we'd be living in a beach house we'd already rented out for two months. We had no idea what would come next.

"Children need stability," I could hear my father's mustache saying. "Is it their fault that their parents have lost their damn minds?" But now the house was rented and the flight tickets were booked. Everything was ready, except for me. How could a man of nearly forty-six years decide to pull his four children out of every known routine and go away for a year? Where did such recklessness come from? Not only that—we were leaving our home in Pardes Hanna with no idea of where we'd be

coming back to. Not even which city! Who could enjoy a trip abroad with no home to return to? No idea where they wanted home to be? And these kids, these nightmare kids. Did I really want to spend twenty-four hours a day with them? And forget them, what about her? Did I really want to spend all day, every day, with *her*?

Last night I went to the hospital. Because of her. She gave me chest pains and paresthesia in my arm. No one knows what paresthesia means, but because a friend of mine had a heart attack last month and told me about it, I could tell I was having one, too. I got on my moped and rode to the hospital. The reception desk was surrounded by people, so I just stood there, shouting like a moron, “Excuse me, I’m having a heart attack!”

No one cared. One guy at the end of the line even said, “And I have appendicitis.”

“Are you comparing appendicitis to a heart attack?” I was just about to start arguing the finer points of illness severity and aches and pains, but then the receptionist called me over. She quickly took down my information and sent me to the emergency room. There were a few people ahead of me in line and once again I had to embarrass myself, shouting, “Excuse me, I’m having a heart attack!”

The nurse removed a woman from the examination chair and another guy complained that his father had been waiting on a bench outside for the past thirty minutes. The nurse explained that she was dealing with a myocardial infraction.

I was really into that term, “myocardial infraction”. It took me back to my days as a single man. I wondered if I’d be able to use it to pick up girls. After some debate, my inner judge determined that it was a line for jerks or old guys, and that it wouldn’t work. It may have even been proof of how old I’d become, the fact that I even imagined it might work. “Hey baby, you’re giving me a myocardial infraction.”

The nurse took my pulse and blood pressure, and another one took me into a room and had me take off my shirt. I hadn’t been shirtless in a closed room with a woman who wasn’t my wife in ten years. It felt really weird. Like, who would even imagine putting an ape like me in the same room as a princess? And shirtless, no less? She put those clothespin things on me, and I tried not to think about my wife. I felt as if every time I thought about her the line on the monitor jumped. Zero independence! She couldn’t live her own life without me for a second. Every shift in my expression was subject to investigation. “What’s wrong? Are you mad at me?”

The nurse was back. Not a bad body at all. She told me everything looked fine. She just wanted me to get some bloodwork. Another soul-crushing line to wait in. I always wonder if the wife of a government minister would also have to wait in line like me.

They left me with that needle on the inside of my elbow. I have no idea what the inside of the elbow is called. That part we used to rub in summer when we were kids and all this black grime would come out. Oh god, it's been so long since I was a kid. I wish I could be one again. I tried to flee my thoughts to a dream vacation abroad, but then I felt my heart contracting again, because I remembered that my next vacation was going to be with her, for a year, with no job or school for the kids. Thank god I write. That way, I can steal an hour each day to do some work and get some freedom. "I have to go write right now. I've got my obligations, honey. This is what will pay retroactively for this trip!"

"When we talked about this trip you never mentioned you'd be working!" she would say. I heard Thailand had some good hospitals. That was a comfort, because all these nerves were going to give me another myocardial infraction. What didn't she get about having to work?

They didn't call my name, and I was slowly going crazy. Was there such a thing as a private medicine emergency room? What about the Minister of Defense's wife's fractured ankle or the president's son's broken arm? Would they wait as long as I was?

I used to love her so much. I would kiss her cheek or her forehead after she fell asleep, thirty or forty times in a row, tiny kisses, whispering that I loved her. I didn't want to wake her, but sometimes I did. And even though we already had a child or two, and she was desperately tired and couldn't always go back to sleep, she loved those kisses. She wanted me to give them to her all night long. As if above anything else, beyond any logic of fatigue or life itself, my love for her was the most important thing to her. And it moved me so much. I can't remember the last time I kissed her like that. I don't even know when and why I stopped.

I got a phone call from Onion Head, one of my best friends. I was about to answer, but then I paused. I realized a heart attack was embarrassing. It meant I was old. So I didn't pick up. Then I got mad at myself. Embarrassed to have a heart attack? I, the model of openness, was too ashamed to tell my friend about it? What was wrong with me?

They finally called me in, and the doctor told me everything was fine. The strange thing was, I didn't even care if everything wasn't fine. I told him it was my wife's fault; that she'd been killing me lately. He said I was lucky it was only lately. The kind of macho jokes that even men don't laugh at anymore.

I walked out of the emergency room and got on my moped. At the light, I glanced at the car waiting beside me. There was a depressed couple inside. All couples are depressed. What does she want from me? She'd never leave. She'd have no place to go. Besides, why would she? I'm the perfect husband, and an easy guy to get along with. So I have my ups and downs, a little moodiness. What's the meaning of her repeated claim that I "don't see her"? What does she mean when she says I "don't take responsibility"? I just don't understand what she wants from me.

*

"Last chance, I'm begging you," he said the last time we fought.

Well, in all honesty, he didn't beg at all.

It's always been my dream for someone to beg.

The only real reason I haven't left him until now is that I was afraid I'd pack my things and make my big exit, and no one would chase me down and try to get me back.

In short, there was no begging. But for whatever reason, he agreed to go in the end.

He always said if there was no work, no financial pressures, no extended family around, things would be different. He always said he was stressed out.

So I came up with this trip. A year without work, without pressure, without school, without running around, without friends, without obligations.

I still love him.

But I've been parallel packing.

I've been packing up our home for storage. But the truth is, I'm packing separate boxes for me and for him. Who knows if we'd be coming back together?

I'm practical. Calculated. Organized. A kickass housewife like he's always wanted. But he's filled the air at home with so much stress and criticism that I could never really pull it off around him.

It's almost one in the morning. I'm far from being finished. Another box and another box. While I worked, I did the math. I've moved twelve homes in my life, five of them together with him. I think I've just about had enough.

We've been sitting on a powder keg, one foot in the marriage, one foot out. Every few hours, there's a small explosion. After every explosion, he starts in with his usual nonsense: That we're the depth of the ocean but all I can see is the waves. That this is a storm, and in stormy times one must bend rather than break. And I tell him I've bent so much I'm hunchbacked.

So this is our last chance.

I mark the boxes. Red marker for mine; blue marker for his.

I've never been a feminist.

*

So when do we tell our parents? How do we inform them that their grandchildren are about to be pulled out of school for a full year, abandoning their friendships? Becoming different? And what about their own son becoming different? What would they tell their friends about his choice to give up an orderly and successful life and go search for himself out east with his bizarre family? For parents, having their kids be outliers is a fate worse than death. I get it now. We have these friends who, whenever we come home from a visit to their house we get into a fight, because their kids are completely normal.

I still love her. My wife. I know I do, because whenever I imagine her dying I feel real pain. My heart contracts and I feel regret for every moment I didn't spend kissing her and making her happy. Then I run out to buy her flowers, book a babysitter, and tell her I'm taking her out to a movie, a cup of coffee, and a walk on the beach. But then she spends an hour getting ready and I get worked up. The babysitter's already been here for fifteen minutes, and she's such a brat. What did I move out of the city for? To pay a fourteen-year-old kid forty shekels an hour? Then my wife finally gets in the car, but realizes she forgot her jacket. Who needs a jacket? It's August, for crying out loud. And that's when I fantasize about being a widower. It's a genius idea: married, but without a wife. No messy divorce, no fuss. Just me and the kids, quiet. I say something, and there's silence. I decide something, and there's silence. I say nothing—silence. Two years ago she was diagnosed with high blood cholesterol and I got all excited. I started buying fresh pastries from that awesome

bakery that never has parking nearby and the fattiest cheese at the deli. But other than gaining ten kilos, nothing happened to her.

What do you want from me? I was single for thirty-six years, and suddenly a woman came into my life. How am I supposed to know how to behave? Did anyone ever teach me how to live with a woman? I thought it was like having a buddy. You have a bad day, he leaves you alone. He has a bad day, you leave him alone. You've got a problem, you find a solution, and you're happy all the time. Who knew it was an entire universe of focusing on the secondary. That every misspoken word, every ill-advised facial expression, are the bricks constructing enormous pyramids of pain, and that every other sentence or look that attempts to elucidate those hurtful words becomes the mortar reinforcing those pyramids? Who's prepared me to deal with every minor, frivolous, superfluous detail? To discuss and parse and take apart and mull it over as if it were a fateful, transformative, determining issue? And what does "taking responsibility" even mean? She's always yelling at me to "take responsibility already!" and I just don't know—who am I supposed to take it from? How should I behave once I've taken it? Would I take on an authoritative voice and say things like "We leave for a hike in thirty seconds!" or rest my chin in my hand and say, all self-important, "I'll pack their sandwiches for school tomorrow"?

What is taking responsibility?

We went to my parents' place on Friday afternoon. I love them. There's no better family in the world. I kind of act like a kid around them, and years ago that almost cost me my marriage, but she loves them even more than I do. I kept starting to tell them, then paused. "Next week," I whispered to her. It didn't feel right, telling them now. I sensed I needed to do something before I could tell them, I just didn't know what. "You'll turn forty-six in October," she whispered. She thinks no one can hear her whispers.

"Shh, they'll hear you."

"No one can hear me. And don't shush me!"

"They'll talk us out of it, don't you see? Let me run this campaign, will you? They're my parents."

"Fine, but don't shush me!"

When I finally did tell my parents, they took the news like this: "You've been driving us so crazy that this actually seems like a sound decision in your state." According to them, "our state" is that we move every year (or two) mate like rabbits

(just the four kids) who we can't impossibly support (we're the salt of the earth). Our state is that we decided all of a sudden (or, gradually) to stay home one Saturday a month (well, truthfully, we've since increased it to two Saturdays) and break up the family (they won't reschedule a single meal to accommodate us) and move to Pardes Hanna with a day's notice.

They're right about Pardes Hanna, actually. It did happen in a day. It was a fluke: our neighbor in Hod Hasharon bought a Kia Sportage, the priciest car a downtrodden middle-class failure can afford. He was the tenth guy on our block to buy that exact car. When our eldest started first grade, we decided we had to do something extreme to change the environment in which we were raising our kids. A Zen master once said that one of the only things people can choose freely is their environment. Once they've chosen it, they become it. We did not fit in with the Sportage vibe, which had taken over most of our friends.

"Are you serious?" said Zaltzman, my oldest friend, when I told him about the trip.

"Yeah, dude, we just booked it!"

"Honestly, man, I don't get why you're always running away. But hey, if that's your decision, have a blast."

"Why do you call it running away? Wouldn't you want to go away with your family for a year? Is there anything better?"

"Of course I wouldn't! Pulling your kids out of school, away from their friends, having them and the wife to deal with all day, every day. What do you think, that when you come back all your problems will be gone?"

How is it that my best friends have become my greatest paralyzers?

*

I'm scared shitless. In my workshop, I always tell students that the way to approach something you're afraid of is to do something you can't take back. So I did it, I bought flight tickets. But my fear hasn't subsided. That madness of going away, giving up the writing workshops and living off royalties, of what would happen when we come home, of the possibility of somebody getting sick or dying, the damage I might be causing my kids... Is this an all-or-nothing kind of trip? We either win back our marriage or...?

And traveling? Some people like to travel. Mountains, lakes. I got sick of nature on my first picnic outing, when I was two-weeks-old, and the flies came at me

in my stroller. I couldn't even swat them away. And now a whole year of that? Who has that kind of energy? And all these goodbyes! I'd be willing to give up the entire trip just to avoid the goodbyes.

"The sushi is amazing!"

"Pass the dessert!"

Everyone pretended to enjoy our last meal together, but in reality no one could taste the food. Who can enjoy a meal when they know for sure it's a preamble to disaster? The moment arrived on Saturday afternoon. My whole family was standing on the narrow sidewalk across from the Suzanne Dellal Center. Terrible sobs sliced through the Persian food at the restaurant we'd just left. Then, someone had the brilliant idea of coming over to say a last goodbye the following day. After all, we weren't leaving till Monday! And so in the middle of crying, half the group decided they would also be coming by the next day, just so they could temporarily dry their tears.

And so we were sentenced to yet another day when the food had no flavor and the sea had no color. The next day they all showed up, but somehow it was easier. We'd all loosened up and started joking around. We decided to say goodbye this time as if we were going to see each other again tomorrow, and we sort of pulled it off.

The only person I couldn't work it out with was Dad.

"When are you going to say goodbye to grandma?" he asked when I came to see him the day before the trip.

"After we leave here."

"All right, well... did you pack sunscreen?"

"Yes, I did."

"Have you checked that you've got all your passports? There's traffic right now. Why don't you take the toll route to Grandma? Do you have your visa? Do you have everything?"

"Moshe, leave him alone!" my mother shouted.

"Do you have insurance? Where did you get insurance? I could have hooked you up with Friedman."

"Moshe, leave the kid alone!"

"Okay, well..."

That's exactly how I messed up with Iris Cohen in ninth grade. I was supposed to kiss her in the eucalyptus thicket after talking in her room for five hours, after five

other dates in her room, after confirming at least five times with a mutual friend that she wanted me to ask her to be my girlfriend and that she would definitely say yes. But I was so frightened that all I did was ask her more and more questions, then went home without kissing her. The next day I broke up with her because she accidentally farted at Iris Levy's place, and my friends wouldn't stop laughing.

The Jerusalem Mountains. I love Jerusalem. Sometimes I really miss it. On more than one occasion, I've caught myself driving to Jerusalem in the middle of the night for no reason, taking a little spin through its streets, then going home. Something about the air there is different.

I parked outside of the nursing home and went inside. I had a feeling this was going to be the last time I visited.

"Always hold your head up high." That was her motto, and I always knew it was what we would write on her tombstone. That's how she survived the Nazis. She was the one who held her head up high while everyone else lost theirs. Saying goodbye to her was awful. She was cold as ice, and I ran circles around her, trying to hug her and alleviate what I perceived to be her anger at me. After the whole song and dance, when I was finally at the door, I turned around and said, "All right, later, Grandma," and walked out. I felt like such an idiot. "All right, later, Grandma." Is this how you say goodbye to someone you might never see again? How could I do that to her? What would I think if my grandchild said, "All right, later, Grandpa" then abandon me in my final days for some weird-ass trip? To what extent are we truly committed to others, rather than just to ourselves?

I was already outside when I turned around and went back to the lobby to look at the fish. The same goldfish we'd been so excited to feed every week. The fish went on like they always do, opening and closing their fish mouths. How much happiness has Grandma had in her life? How much pain? Did she love Grandpa? Did she tell him? Did they have nicknames for each other?

I once asked her, "Grandma, have you fulfilled yourself?" She didn't understand the question. "Do you feel fulfilled?" I tried. She looked at me like I was slow. She always suspected I wouldn't have survived the Holocaust.

Now I shouted, "Grandma!"

A few old people looked up from their Bridge game.

Tears were running down my face. “Grandma!” I repeated. “I’m Grandma Shula’s grandson. Tell her I love her and that I’ll be thinking of her every day of my trip. Tell her that,” I whispered loudly, then left.

The urge to go back, to go back and hug her, to go back and hug her and tell her again that I’ll miss her, that I love her, that I don’t want to leave her. But if I loved her so much and didn’t want to leave her, I wouldn’t be going. I was overcome. I felt like a traitor. Grandma knew I knew she would die and I wouldn’t be at her funeral. While she had her funeral, I’d be drinking a pineapple shake on a beach somewhere. She knew that!

A vow. I needed a vow!

Grandma, I told her silently, if you die while I’m away, I’ll come back for your funeral.

Just then, my sister called.

“Listen to me,” I told her, “don’t pull that trick you pulled when I was in Australia and Grandpa died. If Grandma dies I want to make it to the funeral, you hear me?!”

I walked down the entry path. The decorative waterfall was to my right. I walked past it, then walked back again. I wanted to feel the pain. I wanted the moment to leave a mark. I tried listening to the water. “Grandma, remember how Grandpa always liked to show me his stamp collection? Tell him hi for me. Tell him we ended up selling his entire collection, even the stamps he thought were worth tens of thousands of shekels, for 700. And your porridge, Grandma? With that sweet mildew smell of early morning Jerusalem chill and moth balls... oh, what I’d pay to open the closet in your old house and smell that intoxicating fragrance of childhood. To see Grandpa’s ring of keys by the door, and that burgundy bedspread... oh, Grandma, can’t you just live forever?”

I waited till I was on the roads descending away from Jerusalem before playing her favorite song, “Jerusalem of Gold” on my phone. I cried so hard until I spotted a woman in a nearby car staring at me. Then I pretended I’d just been dancing along with the radio and scratching my nose. I let her pass me and tried to keep crying, but I couldn’t. Not anymore. That’s it. No more Grandma Shula, no more Jerusalem, no more nothing.

3:30 in the morning. I looked at the four blue suitcases in the entryway. My entire life, everything I've accomplished, was inside of them. I owned nothing else. I no longer had a house, a car, a sofa, a closet, a dresser, a bed, a fridge, or even a pot or a key. Everything had been sold or given away. Everything I owned was inside those four suitcases.

I heard her kissing the kids awake. They jumped out of bed, roaring to the heavens, joyful. I ran to them, kissed and hugged them, and then we stood in a circle and sang "We Say Thanks"—a song we once made up, composed of three life-changing words, that we sing every Friday night.

"Come, Mommy," the kids called their mother over.

"Come, Didu," I called her too.

And she came; joined our circle. We held hands. I carried Abigail. We danced in circles, singing our little made-up song. We looked at the children lovingly, and I mustered up my courage and turned to face her. She could feel it. For a moment, she refused to meet my eyes, but then she gave in. It was a brief look, but something about it was impenetrable, and that frightened me.

We'd lived here for two years, and were now taking our final steps in this home. I could hear the taxi arriving. We'd finally be rid of these neighbors, who have yet to say hello to us from the day we moved in. But it's okay, they're goddamn saints, with their vegan diets and the stray cat and rat triage they opened in their backyard.

"Let's go kids, outside. Come on." The three oldest ones bobbed outside with their cute little heads. Baby Abigail was in my arms. "Last chance to say goodbye to our house, you guys," I said.

They lined up outside of the taxi, looked at the house, and waved. "Bye-bye house. Bye, home," they said in their small angelic voices. I wondered which one of them would point out this moment in therapy twenty years from now. Alon started to cry and pushed his head against his mother's bosom. That killed me. We really were leaving this. Leaving everything. That was it. We were going away and never coming back.

"Hold on," I told the driver, "I forgot something."

I ran back inside. We lived here for two years. A whole lifetime. Over seven-hundred days of hopes, disappointments, joys, fights. Life. I moved from one room to

the next, talking to myself about everything that happened in each. “This is where you were born, Abigail. This is where we brought you when you were three days old. Oh, how you’ve grown, baby. You’re already one.” I choked up. I moved to the living room. “This is where we made love after we locked the children in their rooms.” I went to the kids’ bedroom. “We read so many stories here, my loves. We kissed you so many times here. You’ve had so many dreams here. Oh, let it be good for us. Let it be good. Just let us come home in one piece.” I wiped away my tears, settled my breathing, and slammed the door behind me. “Goodbye, home. The last two years sucked.”

I got in the taxi.

“Can we go?” the driver asked.

“Go,” I said.

Two children fell asleep on me, the other two on her. Four suitcases. She and I. That’s all there was in the taxi. Besides the driver. And that’s all I had in the world. And that’s what I was leaving with. Suddenly, I realized I was feeling a sense of confidence I’d never experienced before, though I’ve never had less of a clue about what was going to happen to me. I’ve left everything, just dropped it, jumping into the open arms of destiny, just like in the song that was playing on the radio. I looked at her. She was swallowing her tears. She hadn’t let go yet. She hadn’t really fathomed we were going away.

The first airport catastrophe took place at Burger Ranch, when Abigail spilled coke over her chicken nuggets. Not a minute went by before the second debacle took place—a sixty-year-old woman got punched in the ear by four-year-old Nitzan, who was chasing six-year-old Alon. The fourth terrorist, an incorrigible mole who answers to the name of Evyatar, who was chasing down Nitzan—the second terrorist—took responsibility for the third attack in a row when he rammed into a man in a cast, almost sending him to the hospital for rehabilitation. That familiar pain of a wrong decision made submerged me, along with a bout of painful self-flagellation and guilt for who I am and what I am.

Who needed this? What was so bad about our life?

Then I remembered the drugs. We handed out the tablets, and then there was silence. How could we have forgotten? They walked through passport control and security with heads lowered, noticing nothing that took place around them. At first it was heaven. But then I started feeling bad. When I was a kid, we played Atari at the

home of a friend who was loaded. Maybe it was Pacman. But we never walked like zombies through the airport on the way to an adventure. My father went abroad for the first time when he was thirty. I was thirteen my first time. And now these babies were going to Thailand when they were barely old enough to remember it, and they had zero appreciation for it!

“Kids, enough playing. Hand over the tablets right now.”

Everybody ignored me. They didn't even look up. My wife was the only one who answered: “Are you crazy? They're quiet. What are you getting them riled up for?”

“They don't appreciate anything! We're taking them to Thailand! At their age I'd have my head glued to the windows, looking at planes. And look at them with their heads in the screens. They don't see anything.”

“Daddy, were you a poor boy?” my eight-year-old asked.

After hours of arguments, coin tosses, rock-paper-scissors, kicking and screaming, we decided on the order of seating on the plane. I watched my wife as she walked ahead of me, looking for our seats. It dawned on me: we were really doing this. I felt love rushing through me. I wanted to hug her, to scream in her ear, to dance around with her. But I didn't want to be disappointed by her reaction, so I did nothing. I was wondering if she was as happy as I was. We were going. This was a new beginning. A hope. A dream. Haven't we suffered enough?

I had to do something, so I mustered up my courage and said the line that always got her.

“Didu?” I said.

“What?” she said impatiently. She was looking for our seats and she's never been able to do two things at the same time. It always bugged me when people said that women can do a million things at once while men could only do one thing at a time. For us it was the other way around. She has some kind of severe form of ADHD and can only do one thing at any given moment, while I can do a thousand. Now she was on a mission to find our seats, and could not be interrupted.

“Didu?” I said again, pestering her just for fun.

“What?!” she snapped.

“You're scorching the whole aisle here.” She always loved that line. Always. It's a sure thing. Works 100% of the time.

She smiled. “Good,” she said.

“No, I’m serious. It’s scorched. There’s smoke in my eyes. You burnt the runway, too. The whole airport. People in the duty free stores were burned alive just looking at you.”

Now she was chuckling. “You idiot.”

“With those white millionaire-lady sweatpants. I don’t know how you’re not in business class. I should be put on trial for letting you fly coach with that face and that body. Damn, wifey, you’re out of this world. A bombshell. Believe me.”

That loosened me up. And her. A lot. It’s exactly what I should have said. Both our hearts opened up. She found our seats, and when she opened the overhead bin, someone’s bag fell on her head. She’s so clumsy. I tried to keep up appearances, as if I was just as excited about her, but she wasn’t as excited about herself after that.

I tried to fire up the kids: “You’re about to experience a holy moment. A moment your daddy just loves. The plane is going to pause on the runway and wait for permission to take off. And then... whoosh!” I mimicked the sound of a plane taking off. For a moment, one of them looked up from their tablet, only to shrug and look back down again. The Hebrew word for screen is “masach”, and to me it’s no surprise that it sounds kind of like “mask”. It covers up reality. And how about cables? We’re the ones who end up tied down by them.

I looked out the window. I loved my country. I loved my family. This was the right decision. We needed a change. We needed a fresh start.

I searched for her eyes, and she gave me a brief look. I nodded and smiled. We were starting over. All was forgotten. All was forgiven. She gave a small nod, and my smile widened. This was happening. We were going away, leaving everything, starting new, a full year of just us. What a gift.

The stress of the last few weeks evaporated. So much pressure. So many loose ends to tie. I never knew I was making monthly payments to Greenpeace, to a cable company I no longer used, to the electric company for a house we lived in eight years ago, internet bills from my old office, donations to a hospital in the Philippines for aid after an earthquake that happened five years ago, seventy shekels for widows from Safed, and a National Geographic subscription. When we finished canceling all these payments and memberships we felt as if we’d just run a marathon, visited a Turkish bath, gotten an enema, went on a meditation retreat, and completed a juice cleanse. Pure. Clean. Like new. I looked at her. We got married ten years ago. What did we know back then, about ourselves or about life? Nothing!

Then I spotted her from the corner of my eye. Was it her? She didn't see me. It couldn't be her. Of all the airplanes in all the airlines in the world, she ended up on mine? I decided I wasn't going to look in that direction anyway. My eyes were trained now. I could do it. She'd already taken a few years off my life, I wouldn't let her do it again. I was tempted to sneak another look, but I only allowed myself half a look. She'd just turned to face the window. I couldn't tell who she was with and what she was doing, but it was definitely her. Sivan.

I hated her from the very first moment. Back in college, she always sat up front and asked a ton of questions, especially at the very end of the class. The professors all answered her patiently, smiling. I knew she was taking advantage of her beauty, and they thought she had a crush on them. It was awful.

Once, between classes, she was standing ahead of me in line at the cafeteria, holding a schnitzel plate.

I was nervous, so I asked something dumb like, "You like schnitzel?"

She didn't answer, and I thought she might not have heard me. I considered staring over, but if she *had* heard my question, starting over would be even more pathetic than sticking to the schnitzel theme. So I decided to thicken the schnitzel.

"It's so thick, this schnitzel. You like them thick?" I asked, then immediately heard what it sounded like, so I had to keep talking. "I hate thick schnitzel. My mother always made them super thin."

She still didn't answer. At best, she gave me a look, like, *Leave me alone, you idiot.*

I felt like some poor downtown boy trying to hit on an uptown girl. And I'd humiliated myself with all those graceless lines. "Say," I asked painfully, "why do you never say hi to me?"

She said she'd never noticed me before.

"You've never noticed me? We're in like forty classes together. We've crossed paths hundreds of times. How did you never notice me?"

She looked at me impatiently. I looked back like a dog trying to figure out what that noise was. Then her face softened and she smiled a divine smile. I love that kind of person: a cold, angry face, but when they smile they suddenly melt with such warmth and tenderness and love. There's nothing more beautiful.

"Maybe because I had a boyfriend. When I have a boyfriend I don't really see anyone else."

I could already picture the schnitzel buffet at our wedding. And the arguments with our parents, who would say that schnitzel is cheap. *Who serves schnitzel at a wedding?* And we'd laugh and design the buffet to look just like the one at the campus cafeteria.

I pushed away the memories and imaginations and took a sleeping pill. I had to disappear. The little one was already asleep on her mother, and the others had their heads in the tablets and the airplane screens. I said goodbye, told them if they had any problems they could figure them out on their own, and if they absolutely couldn't they should wake up their mother. Before we left I went to see my doctor and had her prescribe something to knock me out. Something serious. When she handed over the script, she gave me a serious look. Her eyes said: *Trust me.*

I went into complete system failure within two minutes. I woke up eight hours later and didn't see Sivan anywhere. Could she have seen me and changed seats? What if I slept with my mouth open, spoiling years of fantasies?

I looked at my wife. She was asleep with *her* mouth open, looking like a corpse. *Don't start, you idiot. You're turning a new leaf.* I pushed up her chin, but she had the jaws of a crocodile and her mouth wouldn't close. I stuck a finger in her mouth and she startled awake. "Ouch. Stop it. What are you doing?" Then she turned her head the other way and went back to sleep. The important thing was, her mouth was closed now. That's all I needed, for Sivan to see my wife like that. *Oh, come on, enough with this Sivan nonsense.* Did I imagine her? I looked over again. She wasn't there. I decided to take a walk. No Sivan. What a relief. The only problem I still had to deal with was that I had to pee but could never go on airplanes. With that line, everybody knowing what the person ahead of them just did. Then, an announcement: we were preparing for landing. Yay!

Thailand

The kids ran through the airport. Adi and I walked side by side, feeling blessed. There weren't many other large families around. Everyone smiled at us. Passport control had a special line for parents with children. A driver waited for us in the arrivals hall, holding a sign. An Israeli family in a Bangkok taxi. The little one sat on my lap in the front seat. No seatbelts anywhere in the car. The boys turned on their tablets and listened to music. The world flew by before their unimpressed eyes. The eldest asked,

“Mommy, why is everyone Thai here?” and the little one wanted to know if we were in Pardes Hanna.

I walked into the 7/11 to buy some provisions.

“Seventy baht,” said the guy behind the counter.

I couldn't believe it. Less than eight shekels for four large water bottles, a coke, and a Kit Kat. I'd have paid at least forty in Israel. My heart filled with joy. I was a millionaire!

Everyone was so nice at the hotel. “Sawat-dee krap, sawat-dee kah.” The kids played in the lobby. We were pleased as punch and couldn't believe the flight had been so easy. We didn't talk about it. Typically, when we talk about our successes they evaporate. But the satisfaction hovered between us. We'd survived the first obstacle; the first stop; the first, complicated mission—the flight. The longest flight of the trip. The Thai hotel employees were all over our children, touching them and taking pictures of them. We liked that. We like anyone who likes our children.

The next day, we went to see the reclining Buddha. We took about a hundred pictures just walking along it, and then the kids started fighting. It was the first time I thought, *I'm going home*.

The day after that, we went to the royal palace, because the kids wanted to see a real king's home. Then we took a long, painful walk to Khao San Road. Every two minutes, Adi said, “Let's take a taxi, it's too far,” and I kept insisting, “What are you talking about? We're almost there.” Finally we took a tuk-tuk and things started going smoothly, until my wife's phone rang. She forgot to leave it in the hotel room. Who carries around a phone on such a long trip? What did she think, my parents would call to ask if we were coming over on Saturday? Shirley would text her about getting coffee? That kind of thing used to drive me crazy, but now I just thought, “Oh well, it happens.” It could have happened to me too. *After twenty years of carrying a phone around, she accidentally put it in her bag. So what? Look how beautiful and kind and lovely she is. Look at these kids she gave you, raising them for you. She's worked with you for years so you didn't have to pay an assistant. She loves your family. Who's ever heard of a woman who gets along famously with her mother-in-law? What's the big deal? Who do you think you are, anyway?*

Then she handed me the phone. “Your sister.”

“We're coming over for the holidays, brother. I'll see you in six weeks!” my sister screamed into the phone.

“What’s that?”

“We’re coming! We’re coming to meet you!”

“Who’s coming?”

“All of us. Mom and Dad, Galia and Ron, and us, with the kids. Can you believe it?”

“Wow... great... great...” I walk away from Adi. “I was just thinking it would be better if you came around Passover. I mean, if you come so soon, we won’t see you for a really long time after that.”

“Don’t worry about it, we can come twice. Life is short, and it works out perfectly for everyone. How fun is this, huh? I’m so psyched!”

“Amazing! Wow, amazing! Being here in Thailand with the whole family—awesome!” I said sourly. I wanted them to come, but why so soon? We were just putting down the foundations, trying to restore a failed system. If they came now, they’d push us back to the Stone Age. And why were they announcing it like that? Why not ask if they *could* come? If we *wanted* them to come? If it was convenient for us? And how was I going to explain to Adi that I couldn’t say no to them?

We hung up, and my wife walked over. The phone was still against my ear.

“No, sis, this isn’t a good time. We’ve only just started here. You should come around Passover,” I said to no one, then waited for no one to respond, watching my wife’s puzzled expression as she tried to recreate the conversation she hadn’t heard. After a brief pause, I said, “Okay, but I’m just telling you this isn’t a good time for us. Let me think it over and I’ll get back to you.”

My wife was smiling. I was the man she’d always hoped for.

*

After three days of adjustment in Bangkok, we went to Chiang Mai, where we stayed at a disgusting, moldy hotel that Adi had booked back in Israel. We were besieged, there was no going out. Dozens of hookers swarmed the doors. If my eldest clocked that Lady Boy who catcalled me with a deep baritone he’d be traumatized for life. I went out on my own to search for a new hotel, the prostitutes calling out to me from bar doorways. I was almost too much of a gentleman to turn them down, and the past was flooding me, and oops—Sivan was part of it. What if I ran into her? What would that look like? When I ask, “How’ve you been?” would she answer with a bland, “Good, how about you?” Or would we have a real conversation about life? I’ve learned I can’t even bet on things I think I know for sure.

There was not a single hotel in Chiang Mai I didn't check. "Sawat-dee Krap. Any rooms?" But everything was booked solid. And then I realized I couldn't take one more step, because I'd just walked for thirty kilometers in flip flops and my feet were about to fall off. So I sat down at a foot massage place. I picked the oldest, ugliest masseuse there, so that there were no misunderstandings, and asked for 30 minutes. Old European men walked down the street, hand in hand with Thai girls who looked about three years old. I already knew people were sick, but I didn't realize they no longer had any shame.

When my thirty minutes were up, I asked for another thirty. I thought I'd come out of there refreshed, but I felt exactly the same. The only difference was that now the fun was over. That's what physical pleasure is like—nothing stays with you after it ends. But an hour-long lesson with a Zen master is forever. I say "Zen master" because I've learned that when I say "rabbi" no one wants to hear about it, but when I say "Zen master" people get curious. "Wow, a Zen master? How cool! I want one too."

I got back to our room. My kid cried that I'd promised him he'd never have to go to bed hungry. "Just go to sleep," I yelled at him. "It's 11:30 at night, and you're exhausted. You've already had three sandwiches. Why are you still hungry?" Then I gave up, went down to the 7/11 and bought him some more bread and a jar of jelly. If he said he wasn't hungry when I got back I'd shove it up his ass.

When I got back to the room he was already asleep, as were all his siblings. I lay down in bed with a moan. My wife said we had to switch hotels. I told her angrily that there were no other hotels, and that I was sick and tired, and that she was the one who'd booked this crap hotel. I shouldn't have mentioned that. She went into a defensive tirade about how she only booked it because I wasn't booking it, and that I was always shirking responsibility and then complaining to her about how she did things, and how she was sick of it, etc., etc.

Again with her military speak. "Shirking". With her, it's always war. After an hour and a half, we went back to business. I told her the hotel wouldn't reimburse us, and that we should just spend a week in this hellhole and be done with it. This was Thailand, and we had to accept reality. She claimed it was our power as humans to create the reality we desired, rather than accept existing reality. I told her that sometimes creating reality meant accepting reality. I was pleased at least to have come up with that big statement. But it led to a very irritating discussion that caused

her to announce she wasn't willing to go on the typical safari tourists did here, because it was cruel to the elephants, and she wasn't going to play along with that. She also wasn't going to visit the Kayan women with the long necks because they were being abused.

“Then why did we come here if you didn't want to see the elephants or the women? That's what people do in Chiang Mai!”

Tensions were high. It turned out she'd found a rehabilitative elephant farm that took in wounded and tortured elephants and exhibited them to bleeding heart travelers for three times as much as the safari cost. Just a different kind of torture.

The next day we went to see my wife's elephants. I tossed sugar cane into their mouths, imagining the steering committee meeting. At the head of the conference desk was the exacting entrepreneur who was the first to identify an enormous, untapped market section: bored bleeding hearts. People who would rather put all their energy into rescuing a whale who lived tens of thousands of kilometers away than help out the less fortunate in their own hometown. Here are the minutes from this imagined first meeting:

Founder: “The direction we're taking is the claim that riding is the most painful thing you can do to an elephant. A real torture! In our rehabilitative farm, no one will ride the elephants!”

Founder's assistant: “Indeed. Pain experienced by animals is pain experienced by us. That's why over lunch we will emphasize our martyrdom by only selling vegetarian meals. This will help our reliability.”

Board member: “At the end of the rehabilitation tour we'll let participants prepare medication for the elephants, something that supposedly speeds up their digestion. That'll knock them off their feet.”

So we didn't ride the elephants, and we had a vegetarian meal, and gave the elephants some laxatives, because according to our guide, if an elephant doesn't poop for three days they die. And after someone pulled hard on an elephant's ear he raised us into the air on his trunk, then lay down because his Thai handler screamed at him, then sat down in the river so we could clean him. Who other than us was going to remove the poor guy's ticks?

We came back to the hotel tired but happy. My crazy family, the one that sobbed to high heavens less than ten days ago when we left, would be here in just a little over a month. And my wife still didn't know. Every day that went by made it

more impossible for me to tell her. And the days went by. This was going to be the end of me.

*

What a day!

For the first time in years, I was present. It was like getting a second chance. No yelling. Just laughing and joking. I strapped Abigail to my back, picked up a bucket, and bathed an elephant. Evyatar, Alon, and Nitzan helped me, beaming with joy.

Golan was in his “zone”.

That’s what we call it. His “zone” is when he’s caught up in his own mind and no one else can get in there. Even though we seemed to be at the beginning of a beautiful friendship, he went into his zone without any notice, like he always does, and just when we had something so marvelous to do, like clean up the elephant’s poop.

Normally, we’re like hopeless dominos. Once his mood drops, mine follows, and the racket is desperately loud. But not today. Maybe it was the elephants. Maybe it was being away from everything. Maybe the way he was so surprisingly decisive with his family over the phone.

It’s been ten days since we left. Airplanes and taxis and attractions. Palaces and popsicles and fruit shakes and nerves and pools and thousands of Buddhas all around, and Golan, like always: one moment he’s happy as a clam, crazy about me, thinking I’m his prize. The next moment he can’t figure out why he picked me out of all the many women who were banging down his door.

Our desire to love is what kept us together all these years. Two months after we met we were already in couple’s therapy, exactly because of that. Nothing worked, but we had a powerful desire to make it work. We realized that this desire was everything; that love was tricky. Therapy was my idea, but the fact that he agreed to go proved to me how much he wanted it. That he knew he didn’t know. That he was modest and had faith.

But something about his desire diminished with the years. He grew further apart from me, detaching, going deeper into his “zones”.

I’d rather have him explode. Yelling! Screaming! But no.

He's "normal".

Only abnormal people scream and yell.

Normals keep it all bottled up until they die.

I wish he'd say something, but he's silent, still, disconnected.

His face changes. His tone changes. Nobody's home.

And in the end, he feels nothing, which is the worst.

And then I lose it.

And then he gets mad at me for losing it.

But today I didn't care.

The kids and I laughed. We were moved. We walked into the river with the smaller elephants and rubbed behind their ears, while he stood nearby, complaining.

We prepared the elephants' medication and fed them sugarcane, and the kids laughed while he stood there, calculating how much the farm owners were making every day, then every month, then every year.

We caressed the elephants, and the sun shone, and the trees bloomed, and the birds sang, and he walked beside us, saying the elephants here were suffering more than those on the normal tours, the ones that cost a quarter of the price, and that we were suckers.

"Come on, Goli, come rub Nam's back, her skin is dry," I called out to him, smiling. But he kept moping. "Goli, come on, be a pal, Juno is constipated. Help him. You know how dangerous constipation is for elephants..." Nothing. He kept calculating.

Nothing gets a response out of him.

He's got the skin of an elephant.

*

"Who wanted watermelon? Who wanted cantaloupe? What did you say you wanted? Mango? And you? Mango and banana. Abigail—banana? Banana and watermelon? What about you, wifey? Papaya?" I ordered for everyone. I saw one of the kids was sipping slowly. "You don't like it? Then why don't you say so? Are you being shy? What would you like instead? Excuse me, can I get a different one for him?"

In Israel we would all share a single shake. I'd be asking the guy, all pathetic, "Brother, can you divide the shake into four small cups? They never finish anything."

Then, as they neared the end, I'd be getting anxious I might have to order another one. "All right, guys, that's enough. These things are full of sugar. It's not good for you. I'm going to get you a popsicle instead."

But here it was practically free. No matter how much we bought, the wallets stayed full. It was all in the wallets, and there were no expenses other than what came out of our wallets. No electric bills, no gas bills, no rent, no car insurance, no birthday parties, no house cleaner. Everything came out of my wallet, and the wallet was in my pocket. I started with 2,000 baht, and now I had 1,360. That meant we'd spent 640 baht so far, no more, no less. What an incredible feeling of ownership and control.

We took a flight to Pai. We heard it took four hours to drive there and the roads twisted and turned. One of my kids throws up from from switching seats at the dinner table. He walks around half the table, then runs to the bathroom to throw up from dizziness.

So we sat behind the two pilots, who were watching a screen, looking like two teenagers playing a videogame. My eldest was terrified. I told him not to worry. "Daddy's here." But I was shaking even worse than he was. Yes, my life was in the hands of two morons who took a three-hour civil flight course, and a third guy with a stomach virus and a bad bet on a rooster fight. An airplane mechanic, they called him. Somehow, we made it in one piece. I promised myself I'd go back to Israel by boat. I wasn't getting on another plane for the rest of my life.

We stayed at a river resort. A really charming place. I rented a moped, and we went out for breakfast at Home Garden every morning. Then we'd walk around for a while, and I would take my wife and the baby home and go on a lost tour with the three others. We would ride around, trying to lose our way and find new and cool spots. Then we'd go back to the hotel, hang out by the pool, and go out again in the evening.

We decided we would spend two hours a day homeschooling the children. We had them sign contracts before we left. They promised, swore, signed, vowed—two hours a day. But if we managed to get two hours a week it was a real victory.

Every night we took a walk down the street—a single long street, like the kind you see in westerns. But instead of gunshots, there were food stalls where delicacies were sold for close to nothing. Every other sentence out of our mouths was, "You know how much this would cost in Israel?" I was getting worried we were turning the children into anti-Zionists, so we tried to stop, but we couldn't. With each stall we hit,

one of us just had to say, “You know how much this would cost in Israel?” and the other one would answer in English, so the kids didn’t understand, “We said we wouldn’t say that anymore in front of the children.”

Then we would go back to the hotel, to the same fight every night. “We want to go to the pool!” A year-long trip is a marathon, not a sprint. If they went in the pool we wouldn’t be able to get them out of there. I could threaten them with all the punishments in the world until they’d finally get out, dry off, then realize one of them lost his goggles. I’d say, never mind, we’ll get them tomorrow, and he’d cry like a maniac, so I’d tell him to jump in the water and get them, and he’d cry that it’s too cold, and I’d tell him it’s his responsibility, and he’d say he’s only a boy, so I’d take my clothes off and jump in myself. It would be eleven at night by the time we finally got back inside, and they wouldn’t fall asleep, demanding another story, and one of them would have to poop, I don’t know why one of them always has to poop, and then another would find a spider, and by the time we finished dealing with all that it would be one in the morning. You think I don’t know how kids are? No pool after dark, period.

Every night we’d put them to bed, and I wouldn’t be able to sleep because I still hadn’t told Adi about my family’s visit. I’d try to come up with an excuse, some story, some fairytale to diminish the severity of my crime, but nothing would come to me. Even if I told her I couldn’t say no, she’d demand that I call immediately and say no retroactively. You know I love them, she’d say, and they love me, but we had a reason for getting away. We’re here to rebuild our marriage and our family, and if you can’t tell them that, I’m going back. That’s what she’d say. Something like that, anyway. But still, I couldn’t do it to them.

*

At five in the morning someone knocked on our door. I didn’t hear a thing, I was asleep. But my wife woke up with a panic to flashlights moving across the walls, shouted commands, and walkie-talkies. She freaked out, but there were two small children in bed with her, not her husband. Her husband was in the next room with the two other children, dreaming away. This bizarre scenario was made possible because he was the one who’d booked the hotel room in Pai. She demanded that they never sleep in separate rooms. She wanted either one big room or a connecting room for the kids, but he felt like being single for a minute. He felt like saying, “Good night, baby, it was fun, I’ll be in touch,” and go to another room.

He was so excited about the separate room idea that some nights he walked in and out of her room three times, each time parting from her with a “Good night, baby, it was fun, I’ll be in touch.” She took this with some ambivalence. On the one hand, she was charmed to see him so alive. On the other hand, she wasn’t so thrilled to realize how long it had been since she’d seen him so alive.

Anyway, back to five in the morning. The rescue forces didn’t wake me up, but my wife sure as hell did. “Get up! The river is overflowing, there’s a flood! I’ve got Nitzan and Abigail. Grab the two others and run. This is fatal danger!”

I opened my eyes and looked around me. I’ve never liked being ordered around, certainly not by my wife and certainly not so early in the morning. So the first words out of my mouth were, “Get off of me.” Then I calmly sat up and put my feet on the floor, thinking how once again she was getting all worked up over nothing. But it felt as if I were putting my feet inside a bath, and I let out a loud, high-pitched “Mommy!”

Evyatar and Alon woke up. I tried to keep it cool and make them laugh with a song parody to the tune of “Old Macdonald”: “This hotel floor is a pool, e-i-e-i-o, and in this pool the water’s brown, e-i-e-i-o.” Then I picked them up and was about to run for my life, but then the Israeli macho part of me kicked in, telling me, *Bro, I’m not some chicken shit, I served in the military. I’m still in reserve duty. I was in the Israeli army, god damn it!*

So I grabbed a bag and stuffed the laptop and our passports inside, imagining how my wife would worship me for my cool demeanor. But then I tried to leave the room and found it submerged in an enormous swamp. Normally, there were six steps that led up to our room, but now there were none. There was only water outside the door. It was as if all the hotel cabins were floating on brown water strewn with debris. I searched the water for floating corpses or drowning people calling for help. Fortunately, there were none. What I did see were mopeds sinking in the water, scared people, and soldiers with glow-in-the-dark shirts printed with the word “Army”. People were yelling. I panicked. What now? Where should I go? Would I be able to walk or swim with two kids on me? I put one kid on my shoulders and held the other in my arms. They started to cry with fear. I tried to reassure them. “It’s all right, we’re in luck. The water level isn’t high. Don’t worry, darlings.” I started singing my song parody again, but it didn’t sound the same. And I needed to save my breath.

I tried to feel my way to the top step, but I couldn't see a thing. I slipped and fell on my ass, and the children started to scream. Alon, who was on my shoulders, fell into the water. I managed to grab his arms and he screamed with horror. He emerged from the water all brown, as if he'd been swimming in poop. They were both screaming for their mommy, and I asked myself where she was. For a moment I was freaked—Who knows? She may have drowned! Oh, awesome, then I could hook up with Sivan without any scruples. *Oh, come on, grow up, you moron. Besides, she came out of the room two minutes ago. There's no current, no dead bodies. She's fine.*

I took the stairs slowly until I was finally on the ground. The water reached almost as high as my chest. The first thing that crossed my mind was my picture on all the news channels: with two kids in my arms, standing in the water in twenty-year-old underwear with holes in it. It would be terrible for my image. Why am I always wearing this janky underwear whenever something important happens?

A few soldiers told us where to go. We started climbing up the mountain. Gradually, the water only reached my belly button, then my thighs. Before long, we were at a barbed wire fence pulled apart by some rescue force people. An old German lady was in front of me, trying to wriggle through. She got stuck on all fours, one hand and foot on one side of the fence, the other hand and foot on the other side. One man stretched the opening as wide as possible, the other pushed her from behind. My mind was filled with images from concentration camps, and I was overcome with anger.

Then it was my turn. Suddenly, what seemed like no problem at all became a problem. I helped one child through the fence hole, and saw more Holocaust images. Then I pushed the other one through. I was realizing this was no joke. I passed through and we kept climbing. Then I saw my wife and the two other children in the distance, and joy spread through my body, an enormous pressure I didn't even know I had inside of me released. I waved to them like Anwar Sadat, then closed my hand into a fist like some hero. My wife smiled at me as if she was seeing the hero in me, too. When I reached her, we embraced in a real, happy hug. Then I hugged the kids, picking them up high and putting them down, laughing, breathing, thanking, hugging again.

“Didn't you hear them trying to wake us?” my wife asked.

“I didn't.”

“You didn't hear them knocking? The door almost caved in!”

“I didn’t hear a thing. Are you accusing me?”

“What would have happened if I hadn’t woken you?”

“Hey, listen, I saved our passports. I was about to leave the room and then came back for them, and for the laptop. You know how much bravery that took?”

“What about the rest of our stuff?”

“There was no way I could get anything else.”

There was another Israeli family nearby. When they heard that most of our things were still in our room, the father, Yehuda, a former revered air force squadron commander, told his three sons, “Drop your pants.” His children obeyed without a single word.

“Come on, Yehuda, don’t be crazy,” I said, but they were already descending back down the hill to the danger zone. “Yehuda, wait up!” I cried, then started to chase him down. Adi screamed at me not to go back down there. Why didn’t Yehuda’s wife scream at him?

I shouted back at her, “I’m just going to walk them for a bit.”

“Just as far as the fence! You hear me?” she called back.

What did she care? We spent ninety percent of our time fighting. What’s the deal with partners who loathe each other yet insist on keeping each other alive?

As I ran after Yehuda and his sons, I started getting psyched for battle. Yehuda’s rescue party was in action, but the Thai rescue party wouldn’t let us back in our cabins. Closed military area, they said. Were they really going to pull that carp with Yehuda? With Yehuda?!

Yehuda murmured to his frightened children that the water had started to retreat. If he told me to jump into a bonfire because the flames had started to retreat, I’d do it. Damn, how I wish I was Yehuda. Even the bulge in his underwear looked huge, filling me with confidence. Then he signaled to us to follow him. We overtook the rescue party from the right, unnoticed, and continued down toward the hotel. Refugees from the flood crossed our path, their eyes terrified, while we let ourselves sink back into the water—which was, in fact, in retreat. I could already see the top two steps leading to our cabin.

It was a little awkward to watch Yehuda packing up my wife’s bras and underwear, but I had no choice. We packed up everything and returned up the hill like winners. Adi was standing with the children, watching me returning from the flood. I

could sense her waves of adoration and practically got chills. I was such a king in that moment.

Then we were taken to another hotel. That evening, after the children fell asleep, all the parents sat outside on the porch and recalled the events of that morning. It felt like it had been three years ago. We felt like true natural disaster survivors. A sense of sweetness spread through the air. Yehuda put on some eighties music. When “Bird of Paradise” came on my heart melted. I gave Adi a little kiss on the cheek, but one just wasn’t enough for me, and I started giving her a million little kisses right there on the porch, in front of Yehuda and Sigal. I knew this was a serious offense. If anyone else had done something like that in front of me I’d detest them for the rest of my life. There’s one guy who used to be a very good friend of mine until he felt up his wife in front of my astounded eyes—and, worse, my wife’s astounded eyes. He’s still trying to figure out why I cut him off. But now I couldn’t stop myself. Now I was a natural disaster survivor, and I got to do what I wanted. I was a refugee. I was a hero. My life had been saved. Adi smiled. A tender, enabling smile. She wanted more kisses.

We kept chatting, and the subject of Yehuda’s squadron came up. We were about the same age, so I asked him if he knew Assaf Shaul.

“Assaf Shaul? Of course. He and Sivan are like family to us,” Yehuda said.

“Were like family to us,” Sigal corrected.

“Oh, please, Sigal,” said Yehuda, “just because they broke up doesn’t mean they aren’t a family anymore.”

“Oh, please, Yehuda. We’re going to meet Sivan in Copenhagen next week. She’s alone there, need I remind you? Assaf’s back in Israel. From this point on, there’s only moving farther apart.”

“Hey, we’re going to Copenhagen too,” I said, excited. Then I realized Adi was listening. “Right, babe?”