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K'Tina Khozeret: An Adolescent's Return

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K'TINA KHOZERET: AN ADOLESCENT'S RETURN

BY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iv
1. HA'TIKVAH.....	1
2. NES TZIONA.....	22
3. CHAMSIN.....	38
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	64

ABSTRACT

The three stories contained in this thesis function as an exploration of hybrid identity. The main character, Nomi, is a “k’tina khozeret,” a returning adolescent. In legal terms, in Israel, this is a person born in Israel who is removed from the country by her or his parents before her or his 14th birthday. The designation is important because of the slew of rights afforded to immigrants in Israel as a way to encourage Jews to emigrate to the country as well as help those Jews who likely come from disadvantaged backgrounds and were, most likely, persecuted in their home countries. Those born in-country who leave after 14 years of age are considered to have had a choice in the move and do not have much in the way of immigrants’ rights. Those who leave before that age have the same rights as new immigrants, but require a different designation because of the complex system of citizen identification in practice in Israel. The status of returning adolescent, however, is not commonly known among citizens of Israel.

For Nomi, being a returning adolescent holds far more than the culture shock one expects to see in new immigrants to any country. She must deal with her identity, but she must also deal with her parents’ identities—their choices as individuals and as a couple—and her future and what she hopes and plans for as well as who she wishes to become.

The stories are not intended to work as parts of a novel, but to stand individually, as stills in the movie of one woman’s life.

1. HA'TIKVAH

It took a couple of months for the waiver and national service paperwork to come through, but Nomi was glad she waited. Her first instinct had been to just buy a ticket, land at Ben-Gurion and ask for the Tzahal representative. She figured she'd have a chance at being an officer. But, of course, Nomi's mother had other ideas for her daughter's return to Israel. And the national service approach won out. Nomi's mother may have been right, but she doesn't tell her—no need to let her win about Israel.

Besides, with national service, she gets most of her weekends off—not something she could have counted on as a soldier. Every third weekend she works intake, on call, at the home. Her job rarely entails anything difficult, but intake is a nightmare she couldn't handle more than once a month.

The children are brought in, most still crying from their wounds, which she was prepared for, but most also crying for their parents—the cause of the wounds. She still finds herself astounded at the bond between parent and child. At first, she was afraid of hurting them as she held the children while doctors conducted intake physicals, but the doctors at Ben Yehuda are mostly male and the kids need a calming female presence. It had taken her forever, it seemed, to learn to keep herself calm enough to be that presence.

The rest of the month, she plays with the kids, makes lunch with them, teaches them to care for themselves. Occasionally, with older kids, she is a shoulder to cry on, an ear. Sometimes she even helps with their problems, but it was made clear, from day one, that certain problems she is not to “help” with.

“You send them to counselor,” her director said in broken English.

No matter how hard she tries, she can't get the people at the home to speak to her in Hebrew. She has been unofficially made the local version of English Ulpan, a person to practice with, a miniature immersion program. And she has to admit that

while it can sometimes be frustrating to be seen this way—and she really wants to work on her Hebrew, too—she likes being important. It helps with some of the loneliness. It helps even more than playing with the kids could. The other women provide as much to those kids as she does, but only she has the magical American ability to be a person even the folks in charge turn to.

Every other weekend, Nomi rides up to her cousin's house in the Northern Galilee town of T'veria Ilit. Irit is all the family Nomi has in Israel. Even Irit's parents, Nomi's dad's sister and brother-in-law, have left for the greener notes of American currency. Here, she is treated like family. They all speak English, but not in any needy way—they simply speak it at home. The expectations are “normal” here somehow in a way they aren't in the flat she shares with three other Ben Yehuda volunteers—a flat provided by the state and somehow less homey for it.

When Friday comes and she has finished her work hours, Nomi runs across the street to her flat, packs a backpack and jogs to the bus stop. She has to get on the bus before sundown or take a service taxi for the three hour ride. Egged busses are not the greatest of luxury spaces, but her bus pass makes it free and isn't accepted on the privately owned routes. Besides, she gets to at least practice listening in a more crowded environment this way.

Saturday, she wakes up and pads out to the living room in her pink jammies and multi-colored toe-socks. Yaron, who wakes up at daybreak, has taken the 5 year old twins on the Saturday adventure; they have been on these excursions since he snuck them out of the house when they were a month old. Irit nearly killed him for it, but had to back off when she saw the twins clearly healthy and seemingly happy—though she swears you can't tell if a baby's smiling. They will be gone until about 2 pm when they'll return exuberant and smelling of child-sweat and fresh air. Until then, Irit sleeps off last night's drinking.

T'veria Illit hangs above the Sea of Galilee across from Mt. Hermon. Whoever named the Galilee a sea had little world experience. The sea is so small she'd have been reluctant to call it a lake—even at its fullest. But there it sits. Clear water. Gravel and stone beach. Bathers even on cold mornings. And far emptier than it used to be.

Nomi stops quickly in the kitchen, turns on the electric kettle and pulls a mug out of a cupboard. She reaches into a drawer and pulls out bags of sage and mint leaves. When the water boils she adds sugar to the brew and carries it in both hands, cupped close to her face. Irit is on the living room couch, her left arm covering her eyes, her right hanging straight out from under her. Her snores come loud and erratic. As Nomi walks past Irit, she pokes her in the side. Irit rolls over. The noise stops. Nomi steps out on the balcony.

It is huge in comparison to her own, tiny, Tel Aviv flat's balcony—a testament to Yaron's success as an architect—and Irit, being Irit, has filled it with wicker furniture, American style. The furniture is both expensive and misplaced. Nomi doesn't even bother to sit, though she knows the furniture is wonderfully comfortable. Instead, she goes straight to the railing. Sipping her tea, she steels herself for what will be—because it always is—a chaotic Shabbat.

After tea, she decides, she'll do some reading. Nomi has recently discovered Steimatzi, a book store chain that specializes in American best-sellers. The discovery promises to prove expensive as hell. But it's also a deep pleasure and some salve for the wounds of culture shock. She'll just get her father to wire more money—he always does. Since she'll have calm for at least a few more hours, she promises herself the latest John Grisham.

In the afternoon, when Yaron brings back the kids, Irit wakes up like a teetotaler at sunrise. Yair and Galit jump all over their mother, yelling over each other as they tell of their adventure. This time, Yaron has taken them to the camel farm just on the other side of the hill that leads to Natzeret. It is a very touristy place to go and Irit, though

bright with the children is clearly displeased with Yaron. She tells them both to go take a bath; she will not allow them near their food smelling like filthy animals.

“What the hell did you do that for?” she finally gets out once they’ve run off.

“What?”

“Camels? *Camels*, Yaron?” her voice is rising. “Were you stoned or just stupid?”

“I don’t see what the problem is,” Yaron says, his volume lowering as hers rises.

“They’re dirty!” she screams. “Dirty, filthy, disgusting animals and besides, they could have fallen off, and what the hell were you thinking?”

Nomi decides to leave the room.

Though she has witnessed Irit and Yaron’s fights nearly every weekend she’s been here, she never feels comfortable in the same room with them. If her presence doesn’t cause their civility, she can’t see herself as anything but a voyeur in such a situation. The one time she did stay—at Irit’s command—she found herself sitting in a corner of the room with her knees up to her chin, a position she hadn’t been in since her adolescence. Instead, she wants to be with the children, to help them be invisible—one of her better skills—and to avoid the insults and objects hurled at Yaron. But as much as Nomi wants to comfort the kids, who do not really need or often want her comfort, she is also fascinated by Yaron’s behavior. Irit has a special knack for making emasculating comments. Yaron has a knack for not allowing her to get at him. He is not passive; just impervious. He gets quiet. Makes his points without insulting her. Argues with her on equal ground without getting his hands dirty. Nomi loves him for that, which makes her feel like a traitor. From her corner, the time she stayed, Yaron looked like a giant. He stood only five foot nine, but he stood. Irit’s obese six foot frame remained on the couch. And yet, she seemed smaller than ever as she yelled “What are you, a stupid little girl? Have you always wanted to be a good *mommy*? Well you suck at it!”

The worst part comes when Irit demands Nomi take a side—Irit’s side, of course—and agree that Yaron is a villain. Nomi, when caught like this has learned to

stand silently, stare at each of them, and say, “You’re both crazy,” and walk out before any more can be done to drag her in. The fight always continues.

This time, Nomi manages to sneak out unnoticed at a moment when Irit has stopped looking up and Yaron is busy picking up pieces of the glass ashtray that just bounced off his shoulder. She heads to the rear of the apartment where the twins are preparing the bath. Galit has taken charge of the proceedings and Yair allows her, though he guides in quiet ways and checks the bathwater with his wrist like his mother does for him. The two seem settled and impervious. Nomi finds herself standing in the hall, useless. *Better useless than in the living room*, she thinks, and sits down on the floor, leaning against the corner where the toilet room meets the washroom. Nomi waits out the storm in this corner.

An hour later, Yaron and Irit have stopped. Yaron has made lunch for everyone. But the meal is silent and tense.

“I love fried egg sandwiches,” Nomi gushes, still useless.

“I prefer mine without the burned butter taste and black edges,” Irit deadpans.

“I don’t know why,” Yaron responds quietly. “Black edges seem your style.”

It’s his first barb at her and seems intended to start the battle anew.

The children gulp their food down in as few bites as possible and ask to go play. Permission is granted, and the table gets more tense. Nomi decides to excuse herself as well and goes to the living room to read. She knows the fight is not likely to re-erupt until later, but she also knows Irit will drag her out of the house in a few minutes for the adult adventure of the day—a way to get more time off from the children, who spend their weekdays in Irit’s shop. Yaron and Irit take their time eating, making Nomi wonder if the fight has turned into some sort of stare-down. But as soon as they are done, they come into the living room carrying coffee and smiling as though nothing has happened. Yaron hands Nomi a coffee and sits down on the sofa. Irit sits next to him and snuggles into his side, looking as though she might smother him.

Yaron asks Nomi about work, and the conversation shifts to Tel Aviv and the horror of big cities—especially of teaching in one. Irit says she hates big cities (though T’veria is no tiny town). T’veria, Irit explains for the thousandth time, is big enough to be interesting and small enough to be safe and good for her kids. Nomi nods on cue. She’s heard this before. This conversation is old. It’s worn and comfortable for them all. So when Irit announces that next weekend she’ll be staying with Nomi in Tel Aviv, Nomi is thrown out of her groove.

“Why? You just said how much you hate big cities—Tel Aviv most of all,” she says.

“It’s the first weekend in November.”

“And?”

“And there’s the *Peace Now* protest and memorial ceremony for Rabin.”

Nomi nods again, though she is unsure why. The room is silent for a moment. Yaron smiles at Nomi in a way that makes her think she should be able to decipher some message in his face, but she can’t.

“Yoo gerlz hev fun!” he says in English with a heavy mock-Israeli accent. His nearly flawless English rivals even Nomi’s and drives Irit crazy because even the accent is barely noticeable. Nomi likes to speak English with him so he can practice, though Irit gets jealous. Still, Nomi thinks Irit needs the competition.

Nomi laughs. Irit throws Yaron a look but then seems to change her mind and go with the joke, “Vee vyilll,” she says softening her ls to make it Russian. “Yoo no I lllove a protyest.”

The three laugh, but Nomi keeps her laughter soft so as to gauge theirs.

Irit gets up, looks at Nomi and says, “We’re going to the market.”

Nomi follows.

Irit takes them to the Arab flea market. They wander through together for a while, but Nomi slips away when Irit starts haggling with a vendor. She has no intention of buying anything and Nomi knows it, but Irit loves haggling. The market is full and noisy, The smell of incense makes Nomi feel dizzy in a pleasant, drunken way. Nomi finds a brightly colored dress she can't afford and talks the guy out of overcharging her by batting her blue eyes at him. She learned this trick from Irit who gave up on teaching Nomi how to haggle. Irit insists that if Nomi were to get a good blonde dye she could get paid to wear the wares. Nomi turns down a new lane and realizes that she has not been here before. She suddenly feels lost and worried by the crowd, but realizes that the market is really small, and she will find Irit again—or rather, Irit will find her. The silver merchants yell at her as she walks down their lane, “Hey sweetness, you need to be jeweled!” “I’ll give you the jewelry if you give me a kiss!” “Ya! Does your husband know you’re here alone?” Nomi keeps her nose in the air, her eyes straight ahead—something she learned after her first visit when she’d made the mistake of telling a vendor she wasn’t married; thinking it would be a good haggling trick.

It wasn’t.

“Well, then,” the vendor had replied. “How about a cup of coffee? Later? Or now?”

Nomi was about to accept, sure her charms were winning her a bargain, when Irit came to her rescue.

“She’s not allowed to have coffee,” Irit said grabbing Nomi’s hand and dragging her away.

“Hey! What’s the big deal?” Nomi demanded, and when they were out of earshot she added, “I was about to make a great deal!”

“You were about to make a great mistake,” Irit said. “Coffee is not coffee in Israel.”

“Huh?”

“Here, when a man invites you for coffee, you should find out if he means Israeli or American coffee.”

“What’s the difference?” Nomi asked, still not sure what had happened.

“American coffee comes with cream—and without sex,” came the curt reply.

Nomi was horrified—only somewhat because the man was clearly older than her father.

“Oh, please just get over your American naïveté,” Irit demanded.

And it was probably the use of American as an insult that made her truly angry—and then defensive.

Irit had still not let go of Nomi’s wrist at this point. She held on until they had left the market that day.

Since then, Nomi has picked up Irit’s market mannerisms well enough to keep herself out of most forms of trouble, though not all. She makes her way between the lovely jewelry, watching it out of the corner of her eye. But then she hears a light tinkling and has to turn. A woman stands in one of the vendors’ spaces. Her nose is pierced, her eyes an amber that catches the sunlight and is only magnified by the kohl around the insides of her lids. She smiles and lifts up her hand and shakes it to make the sound again. Her hand is wrapped in what seems to be chain-mail with tiny little bells strung over it. The silver bells dangle on the silver fence around the woman’s lovely brown wrist, with little black stones hanging from the bottom- and top-most rows. Nomi watches, entranced for a moment, and knows she must have this bracelet.

She has never had to pay full price before, but blue eyes won’t fix it *this* time, and so she’s about to do so when Irit shows up for yet another Saturday market rescue.

“Hey, what *are* you doing?” she asks, sidling up to the transaction. She turns to the vendor and hands her a card, saying, “She works for me; she just hasn’t gotten her card yet.” The woman smiles, mumbles hello, and instantly drops the price by 40 shekels. Nomi jumps at the buy, though even the 110 shekels is steep on her salary. Still, the bargain feels better than any blue-eyed bargain she’s ever made. She and Irit walk away, headed back to the main road, when Nomi asks what just happened. Irit pulls out the card and hands it to Nomi.

“Women Artist Local’s Union,” Irit says in English.

“Local Women Artists’ Union,” Nomi says and stares ahead, knowing Irit is giving her a dirty look. Though she has permission to correct Irit’s English, and Irit has even asked her to, it is never a pretty process.

“Whatever,” Irit says, returning to Hebrew. “That woman was Hannan. She’s a member. The first woman in her family to sell jewelry, much less make it. She’s amazing. Beats the men in her weekly take every single time. They hate her. The only man in her village who still talks to her is her grandfather: he taught her everything.”

With this, Irit looks out the window of the service taxi they’re taking home. She sighs.

“Anyway, if you’re a member of the union, you get a discount—or, in our case, your cousin gets one. I can’t get you a card because you live in Tel Aviv. Too bad. There’s only about 20 of us so far, and it would be nice to have you there. But it’ll get better. Those guys at the market think Hannan’s going to quit. But none of us are. We’re all trying to recruit wherever we can locally. But it’s tough: there are trust issues. The meetings might as well be AA.”

“There’s AA in Israel?” Nomi asks.

“Yes,” Irit says in her you-must-be-stupid voice—a voice Nomi’s heard though never aimed at her. “What, you think Jews don’t drink?”

“I know they do, just seems like they wouldn’t be likely to agree on a solution long enough to take any of the steps,” Nomi responds quickly trying to salvage her dignity. “Regardless, she clearly knows you, why not say hello properly; hug, ask about the family?”

Irit ignores the question and instead tells Nomi about how the group got started.

“The union is the outcome of a friendship between two women—one Jewish, one Arab, both Israeli citizens, both activists, both artists. It seemed a quiet way to change the messy world around them.”

As Irit says this last part, Nomi has the sense she’s being read to out of a brochure. She nods and says hmmm in the right places, but she finds herself wandering away to other thoughts and looking at her bracelet. She slowly turns her hand back and forth in her lap, listening to the light jingle, feeling like a five year old. Irit continues with the brochure-fairy-tale recitation of the union.

“They began meeting regularly on Thursday nights, taking turns at different women’s houses. Thursdays were the days closest to the weekends and not on anyone’s Sabbath. Women whose families would not be open to the idea did not have to host, but everyone brought food to the meetings. The women in the union were very involved in every kind of art. I didn’t think they’d let me join, since my store is just a place to sell my knits and dresses and whatever the hell else I make, but my friend showed the women rugs I had designed and woven the year before and the vote was unanimous.”

Nomi was still working on learning to knit fair-isle sweaters for Irit’s shop, so she didn’t feel fully entitled to an artist’s discount, but a shake of the jingly bracelet made her forget the guilt. The thought she had bought it from an Arab woman making her way against the grain made her proud to own the piece.

When they arrive at Irit’s, Nomi announces she’ll be staying the night. Though she usually has to leave by Saturday night to be fully functional at work on Sunday, she knows she can call in a little late and go straight from the train station to the home, so

the early morning train ride, though long, will not hurt too much. Filled with a warm, happy feeling she cannot explain, she has decided to volunteer to make dinner to celebrate her beautiful purchase. She announces the dinner and asks for requests, hoping Irit and Yaron will also feel her inexplicable joy and allow the evening to pass in peace. As soon as she finishes her announcement, Yaron yells, "Shepard's pie!" before Irit or the children can say anything. Nomi waits for dissent, but there is none.

"I bought the ingredients yesterday, before you came—in the hope I wouldn't have to make it and poison everyone," he quickly adds. Yaron smiles at Nomi and she feels as though she's just been ambushed and hugged. She wonders why Irit picks fights with this sweet man.

Nomi once asked Irit about the fights. Irit's response was vague and noncommittal. "You don't live with him," she said. Then, with a smirk on her face she added, "Besides, the make-up sex is amazing."

Nomi felt childish. Why Irit would want to stay with a man she regularly called a stupid girl, why he would feel turned on by her was just beyond Nomi's reckoning. She thought about the fights, the insults, the record number of vases bought and thrown, and decided she must be missing some fundamental understanding of marriage. Hate and love, she knew, lived dangerously close to one another. Her own parents were proof of that, but even they argued more than they fought—they were civil about their hate. Maybe, she thought, Irit and Yaron had it right, being civil about hate seemed only a surface lie. Being ugly might at least be honest.

"Shepard's pie it is!" Nomi says brightly and heads into the kitchen. Five minutes later, Irit joins her, offering to peel potatoes and starting the kettle for coffee. Yaron avoids the kitchen, which Nomi finds a bit odd but refuses to think about too much as though keeping it out of her mind will keep the fight from continuing. Still, she knows the peace has not been brokered, and an explosion will occur before bedtime.

Perhaps the sex is better immediately after a violent warm-up. But the cooking remains quiet.

Dinner is also quiet. Yaron seems too busy eating and gushing over the food, and Irit picks at the kids for not sitting straight, not chewing with their mouths closed, not using their manners. Yair gets the brunt of it for mixing his pie up into a large pile of mush. Nomi immediately does the same with hers to try and deflect some of the anger from him. Irit kicks her under the table, but doesn't say a word.

"Fine," she finally says. "If we're all going to behave like barbarians, then we're *all* going to behave like barbarians."

With that, she puts her hand in her food and mashes it all together, eating with her fingers for the rest of the meal. Yair finishes first—and points out that he has "won" dinner before asking to be excused. Galit stuffs the rest of her pie in her mouth, and gets up, not bothering to swallow. The giggling from their room starts up almost instantaneously. It is the only sound in the apartment.

"So why aren't you coming, Yaron?" Nomi asks the silent table.

"Hmmm? Oh, the Rabin thing?" he asks as though there were any other *thing* he'd be coming to. "I'm no activist. Besides, someone has to watch the children."

"There are no activists in this family," Irit says with finality. "There are not even any activists at this table."

"Why are you going, then?" Yaron asks.

"Someone has to go," Irit says with the same tone he had used to say he had to watch the children.

Nomi opens her mouth to respond, and realizes that she's not nearly active enough to be an activist and that really Irit isn't either. She can't quite find a way through this line of talk so she changes the subject and tells them about her ride up the day before.

"I was sitting there, reading my book, trying to be inconspicuous, and then I hear these two guys arguing. One's definitely a *Dos* and the other is obviously secular—"

"Wait," Irit jumps in, "Was he a fur-hat *Dos* or a knit-*kippa Dos*?"

Nomi thinks.

"Neither," she finally says. "The *kippa* was black satin, not knit. But no hat."

Nomi pauses to reconstruct the man in her mind. "But he had a coat. More like a New York ultra-Orthodox *Dos*."

"*Nu*, so he got on the bus in Bnei Brak," she announces. "And seculars are called *Akhilona'i*, by the way."

"Oof! Irit, I'm not stupid." Nomi says. But Irit's back to geography.

"I wonder if he's Tel Avivi."

"Why does it matter?" Nomi demands, ticked off Irit is disrupting the story for something so unimportant. But Irit and Yaron answer that it depends on what they were arguing about and demand she continue the story.

"Well," Nomi starts again grudgingly. "The *Dos* said to the *Akhilona'i* —no; he yelled it. I was a good 10 meters away on a crowded bus. It was one of those slightly quiet moments—but he yelled, 'You, my friend, are the reason we had a Holocaust!'"

"He said *Holocaust*?" Irit interrupts again.

"No. No. He said, *Shoah*, but same difference," Nomi says, trying to continue her story.

"It isn't!" Irit says. "You said he was a New York *Dos*."

Nomi feels lost, but answers anyway, "No. I said he was dressed like them. Maybe he's Lebuvtich."

"*Nu*, get back to the story!" Yaron says loudly.

"Not unless she's going to tell it right!" Irit yells as though he's not half a meter away from her.

"She's doing fine," Yaron says, his volume automatically adjusting down in counterpunct to hers.

"No, she can't even tell a New York *Dos* from a B'nei Brak *Dos*, and though I've told her a million times, she insists on saying Holocaust even though she knows it's an insult."

Yaron clears his throat and puts his hand on Irit's on the table. She moves it to her lap, but his hand follows hers.

"Go on," he says to Nomi.

"Well, the whole train car got even more silent waiting to see what the *Akhilona'i* would say. And it felt like we waited forever, but the *Akhilona'i* finally said, 'Too bad they didn't kill all of *you* and *yours!*'"

"What happened next?" Irit demands.

"Nothing. It stayed silent for a moment, and then everyone went back to what they were doing. I really don't get it."

Irit stands and says, "That's that," then goes to the living room to have an after-dinner smoke. But Yaron seems in a different mood. He decides to explain that arguing is far more important than reaching a conclusion. "There is no conclusion," he says conspiratorially. "But the discussion will get us closer to it."

"To what?" Nomi says.

"The conclusion," he answers, smiling. "Don't worry. Neither of them really meant it. They just ran out of intelligent things to say."

The following Friday afternoon, Nomi meets Irit at the Central Bus Station. Though her job comes with Friday afternoons off, she's left the home early this week to make it all the way to the old section of town by the time Irit demanded she be there.

Irit gets off her bus and walks toward Nomi, smiling wide, looking as though she wants to look like a movie star. The women hug and kiss each other's cheeks.

"This is going to be wonderful!" Irit breathes into Nomi's ear.

"Yoo no I llove a protyest," Nomi replies.

"Nyet. Byecoz a protyest isn't all that's happening this weekend. I'm glad you dressed up. Oh! And what a nice bracelet," she says, holding Nomi's wrist and winking.

Irit hooks her arm with Nomi's and starts to lead her away from the buses. They wander down to the fourth floor where the service taxis pick up their passengers. As the two walk out into the sunlight, Irit raises her hand to her eyes. Seeing who she's looking for, she raises her arm above her head and waves. A tiny Peugeot heads their way, pulls to the curb, and stops. Irit opens the door and motions Nomi into the back seat. She gets in front, hugs and exchanges a cheek kiss with the man driving, and then leans back, rolling the window down and lighting herself a cigarette as he speeds out of the station, swerving around buses and pedestrians at full speed.

"Nomi, this is Omer," Irit yells over the wind and radio. "Omer, Nomi's parents are American, so we don't make fun of her folk-singer name, ok?"

Omer nods and the ash dangling at the end of his cigarette falls in his lap.

"*Kus'emok!*" he yells and wipes it off.

Nomi sits back, trying not to watch as he flies them into the city, toward city hall and the city square. The car barely misses slower, saner drivers several times before Nomi decides to close her eyes completely and breathe deeply despite the wind and smoke. Omer has either timed every green light in Tel Aviv or is running reds, but Nomi isn't curious enough to find out. By the time they stop, the deep breaths are bordering on hyperventilation. Omer parks the car on the street—a minor miracle in this part of town—and the three get out. Nomi looks around to see if anyone else is here this early, but Irit grabs her by the arm and pulls her into the Dunkin Donuts on the

corner. It is the only Dunkin Donuts in the country and every time any of Nomi's non-Tel Avivi friends visit, they make her bring them here. Nomi would prefer a good patisserie but has learned to keep her mouth shut. They'll be out of here in a minute anyway.

The alley between the main square and the high-end shopping mall is already filled. Nomi sees people pass by the small memorial against the corner of the mall where Yitzchak Rabin was assassinated. The main square will be shoulder to shoulder in two hours' time. Irit has made them come early so she can "get a good seat," she tells them. But Nomi knows what Irit wants is a place to stand that's near the music and far from the memorial. Nomi, Irit, and Omer cross the street holding hands like a first-grade field trip and join the milling crowd in the square. People bump into each other, but without the usual jostle Nomi associates with Tel Aviv crowds. They excuse themselves—radical behavior in Israel—and Nomi feels somehow comforted by the manners she has never experienced in a city this big. The service starts and she suddenly remembers her general dislike of large crowds—a rare trait for a girl who grew up in New York. She has avoided concerts her entire adult life because of it. But for this night she's willing to try.

The effort has her muscles tensed, she thinks, then realizes the sensation is coming from around her. Nomi has Irit's hand in hers. One woman, standing in front of her is too tall to see over. Nomi leans to look around, maybe see what's happening on the bandstand, and decides it's not worth looking at. She closes her eyes for a moment and lets the music and the noise wash over her. Then a woman leans against her shoulder and cries into it. Nomi opens her eyes and tries to find Irit again. She is relieved to see Irit just ahead of her, but the feeling sinks when she notices that Omer has his hand in Irit's back pocket. Irit turns around as if to check on Nomi and winks. She smiles a bright smile Nomi can't place. Nomi smiles back but raises an eyebrow. The gesture is lost on Irit, who turns back without response.

Nomi feels the anger rise up in her. She wants to hit them, pull them apart. She wants them to feel ashamed but somehow feels it is the wrongest possible place and time for that. Instead, she moves up and stands next to Irit, grabbing her hand and squeezing, hoping Irit will understand. She doesn't. Or doesn't want to. Temporary Sanity is on stage playing their only hit, "The Last Summer," and Nomi feels the homesickness this song always brings. Then the woman suddenly grabs her hand and begins to sway, forcing Nomi along with the movement. The crowd shifts. This Friday evening memorial is full of the secular Jews of Nomi's generation. They are here, some of them, to come as close as they ever have or will to worship. They move together as a group, swaying in a wave of hundreds, and Nomi is left with the sensation of not being wholly herself, or wholly, of being more than just herself. She is confused but comforted. Irit lets go of her hand, but it is immediately grabbed up again by another person. Nomi puts her other arm around the crying woman, trying to comfort her and pats her gently. "I was here, I was here," the woman mutters into Nomi's collar. Nomi pats her back, but is unsure what else to do, or even what the woman is saying. The sun sets. Someone hands out candles, people light, candle to candle, and the singing continues. The crying woman has stopped crying and is leaning against a man on her other side. The candles burn down and then gut out, slowly. Someone has placed *Yahrtzeit* candles all around the square and as the mourners' kaddish is chanted by the crowd, people begin to light these as well. Nomi closes her eyes again.

It is nearly midnight when Irit and Omer find her, as they move slowly with the crowd out of the small alley and city square. Nomi has been standing under an overhang of the mall's parking structure for over an hour, bathed in orange sodium-light, just waiting for Irit or Omer to pass by, wondering if she could even recognize Omer, hoping Irit will find her. It's taken her these hours to figure out she should just cross the street and wait at the car. As she moves out slowly from under the structure, she sees Irit standing at the entrance, waiting, scanning the crowd. Nomi waves. Irit

waves back. The crowd is singing *HaTikvah*, the national anthem, over and over again, reluctant to let go of the song, or the rally. *Tikvah* means hope and Nomi is filled with it as she has never been before. But also with a sadness she can't quite explain. She did not know Yitzchak Rabin, did not live under his government, was not present at his assassination, was not part of the peace movement when he died. But now she feels she should have been, if only to know the people around her better. She looks around, trying to gauge them, though she knows it's too late. She sees a little girl, no more than ten, carrying flowers and wearing a crown of flowers in her hair. She sees kids chase each other around as their parents yell at them. She sees the crying woman walking with the man she had been leaning on—the two of them laughing now.

Strangely calm, she reaches Irit and Omer and they all pile back into the car. Omer turns over his shoulder and Nomi thinks he's about to say something to her when he suddenly hits the gas and yanks the car into traffic. At the intersection, they stop as the crowd evacuates the square. The light turns green, but the crowd continues. They sit for a moment, then Irit leans out the window.

"Get the fuck out of the way, you stupid cow! It's our light!" she yells at the crying woman and her new man as they straggle across the street like drunken lovers. Nomi is shocked at the language.

The two pass without even turning their heads, and Irit and Omer laugh as Omer hits the gas and they take off into the city.

"Hey, how about Barbi," Irit says, turning to Omer. "It's open mic and free drinks for women."

"Yeah," he replies, sounding stoned.

"Nomi?"

"Why did you yell at that woman?" Nomi asks in response.

"She was in the way," Irit says snidely. "She was ugly, too." Irit and Omer break out in the same laugh they shared as the crying woman crossed in front of them.

“Didn’t you feel weird? Yelling insults? We’ve just spent hours talking and singing about peace and hope, and the first thing you do is yell?” Nomi’s voice is calm, almost childlike in its plaintiveness, but she is angry, bewildered. She feels as though she is failing to process anything. Internally, she can hear herself screaming, but her voice lowers, she can’t bring herself to insults or shouting. “What hope do we have for peace if we can’t even get along amongst ourselves?” Nomi asks, upset that she can’t make herself sound more adult, more assured.

“Hope? You have *Tikvah*?” Irit asks and laughs. “Okay, Omer, you can make fun of her now.”

“But why? Why bother going at all, then?” Nomi asks.

“Oof! Nomi! Hope isn’t something you act on, it’s something you have. It’s the only way to stay alive in this stinking country and if you had to stay here, you’d understand. But you can leave whenever you want. So you have luxury instead of hope. You want to know about hope? It’s a lie. But it’s a lie all of us have bought to keep waking up and going to work. Peace, well, peace is a joke, unless you’re spelling it in English; p-i-e-c-e. Then everybody wants it.”

“Why go, then?” Nomi asks again, louder this time, building up to her anger, trying to let it out in calm adult tones—picturing Yaron standing like a giant in his living room.

“Because you have to. You have to remind yourself. You have to feel hope or it disappears. But you don’t have to believe in it.”

“Or to spend time with *friends*,” Omer says in a suggestive tone. Irit slaps his shoulder.

“That sounds like a great pile of crap, Irit. Does it make you feel happier?” Nomi asks.

“When you’ve lived here a decade you can ask me again.”

“Oh, so I’m not Israeli enough to think you’re full of shit?” Nomi is suddenly yelling, but she can’t bring herself to care and has forgotten her admiration of Yaron’s calm. “That’s just fucking grand!”

“Ever pay attention to *Ha’Tikvah*?” Irit asks. “Ever really sing the words? Spelling can be fun in Hebrew, too. If you write the words properly, if you pronounce Ayin or Aleph you can change the song to the *real* meaning. And it isn’t ‘our hope has not been lost yet.’ Think about it.”

Nomi does.

“Our hope still hasn’t worked,” she mumbles almost a minute later.

“Goddamn right!” Irit yells into the night. “You coming to Barbi? They have open mic tonight—and free drinks.”

“I’d rather go home,” Nomi says.

Irit gives Omer Nomi’s address and he drives, trying as best as he can to scare Nomi back into submission, she thinks. When they pull up in front of her apartment building, Irit gets out of the car and pulls the seat forward, letting Nomi out.

“Come upstairs and I’ll give you the key,” Nomi says.

“I’ll catch you in *T’Veria* on Friday,” Irit answers, pecking Nomi on the cheek.

Irit hugs Nomi. Nomi’s arms remain ragdoll-like at her sides. As Irit gets back in the car, she yells, “Last chance!” out the window. Nomi is already 10 meters away. She continues toward her entryway as Omer yanks his tiny vehicle out of the small lot and shoots back into traffic, headed to the beach.

Nomi stands at her entryway for a minute, staring at the street. She suddenly feels she should be doing something other than what she is doing. Should she go up next weekend? Should she call Yaron? *Maybe, she thinks, I should keep the hell out of it. What would Yaron do, anyway? He’d stand in his living room, calmly, rationally, telling Irit that she is killing him, killing their kids, killing their marriage. He’d tell her he wants to hope but*

that she keeps him from it. Or maybe the make-up sex is good for him, too. Maybe knowing isn't the point. Maybe choosing to act or not act is.

As Nomi starts up her stairs, lost in thought, she fingers her wrist to play with her bracelet. But the bracelet is gone. *The crying woman must have taken it,* she thinks. As Nomi continues up the stairs, a lightheadedness takes over her. But, she notices, it is not the euphoria or hope of earlier.

2. NES TZIONA

I was sitting in front of the nurses' station talking to Nurse Luba. I hate nurses. I love nurses. Ask me in the first 24 hours and they could all rot in hell. Ask me when I've been in for a while and they're all my best friends.

The word admissions has always made me long to walk into an office and find the first person who doesn't look busy enough and say "Forgive me doctor, I have sinned." Problem is, I don't know what to confess, and Israeli bureaucrats have no sense of humor.

Nurse Luba was desk three in the reception line, after the admissions secretary and a doctor. Her job was to conduct the mandatory admissions inquisition. The process is like walking the Stations of the Cross—in character. I'd been through it in every hospital I'd ever committed myself to, but never—before that day—in Hebrew. The novelty wore thin in an instant.

"How old are you?" she asked, deadpan.

"Twenty-four," I answered trying to match her monotone. This could go on for hours.

"Are you married?" *No.* "Have you ever been married?" *No.* "Is your general health good?" *Yes.* "Do you wear glasses?" *Only to read.* "Do you have them with you?" *Yes.* "Are you having difficulty sleeping?" *No, I have difficulty not sleeping.* "Do you have difficulty hearing?" *What?* Luba didn't even blink. "I said, are you . . ."

That's when I saw her. She was stomping by; pissed off, I thought. She heard me, turned, and winked. I smiled back. Nurse Luba just kept going. I spent the rest of the two-hour interview in a daze, answering by rote.

I was entranced by Faith the moment I saw her. She looked like every guy I'd ever dated—only younger. Faith wore army surplus pants and a black t-shirt. She had short black spiked hair and was all attitude; all 5 feet 6 inches of her. She was skinny,

which I guess is why I wasn't sure if she was a boy or a girl. I couldn't quite figure her out. I did know she must be cool to walk like she did—like she owned the place. And I knew I wasn't.

Luba took me to get some scrubs. I would be required to wear hospital clothes for three days while under observation. If, after that time, the staff decided I was 'safe,' I'd get my civvies back. I suddenly realized I didn't have clean underwear. No biggie, my mom would bring me a few packs of new ones. The greatest benefit to mental illness, in my family, is getting new underwear every time you pop. I stopped having to ask for them at least five hospitalizations ago. Luba and I rummaged through scrubs in pink polka dots and purple. I found a pair that fit and put them on.

I felt like a 200-pound party favor.

Faith was 19. She was in Nes Tziona awaiting transfer to a halfway house for kids coming off drugs. Her drug of choice was heroin. She missed it like a dead parent. Faith had been living with Sima, an older woman who'd picked her up off the street. Sima had a 'healthy' attitude toward drugs. Heroin was fine with her, every once in a while, and especially if Faith was jonesin' real bad. Sima 'helped' Faith for a month, then got bored and dumped her about three blocks south of where she'd found her, on the beach, in front of the Opera Tower in Tel-Aviv. Most any beach in Tel-Aviv is a good place to go looking to score. Any beach but near the Opera Tower—the neighborhood is just too full of folks who own furs and actually wear them in the Israeli heat.

Faith, obviously in withdrawal, was picked up by the cops. They dragged her to the hospital for clean up. They called her parents. Mom and dad, rich enough to matter, got her into a 'good program' and greased the wheels for her to get into the new

halfway house as soon as it was built—with a sizable donation from them to ‘help the final stages of construction.’ Guilt being thicker than love, Faith was going along with the plan.

My second day in hospital, Faith came to my room. Casting a glance toward Anat, the masturbator, while gliding around Tamar’s clothing and Dina’s artwork, she came at me with a wicked smile.

“Y’wanna go for a smoke?” she asked.

I would have killed for a smoke. I was dying to know her, to be cool with her.

“I guess,” I said.

We strolled up the corridor to the great room, my loose scrubs swishing together at each step. Two patients and a nurse sat watching *Perla*: the best South American soap ever. Even I was addicted. I slowed as we passed them and turned to look at the screen. It was a rerun. I looked at the patients and the nurse. All three were glued to the set. It was tough to tell who was on meds and who wasn’t.

On the other side of the great room, Faith opened the door to the smoking area—a small courtyard, big enough for five adults holding smokes—or cocktails. There was a small bench against the far wall, next to an ex-flower pot filled with sand. We sat down and lit up.

“Alright,” she said. “Fes up.”

If only the nurses would use such a straightforward approach, we might get friendly sooner. But Faith, cool as she was, had the advantage of not having a key to the place. She knew I wasn’t contagious. Of course, I also knew she could believe me as much as I could believe her and that currency had no stable value in here.

“Ummm . . .manic-depressive, seasonally affective,” I began my resume. “Spent yesterday counting pills and calculating dosages. Thought I’d check in to see what color uniform they issue here.” I looked down at my pink and purple polka-dotted self and said, “Not the statement I’d been hoping for.”

Faith chuckled. I got down to business telling her about the ex-boyfriend, the ugly breakup and the 30-hour sleeping jag I’d gone on after he’d packed his things. In exchange, she told me who everybody was, who to trust, and which nurses to avoid.

“You know,” she said after the basics were done with, “guys are bad for your health.”

“Yeah, but what else can I do?”

“Girls,” she said.

I didn’t know if she was serious, but I had many friends who would agree. “I see your point,” I said and left it at that.

I put out my first cigarette, already mourning its passing and counting out how many I had until my mother would be allowed to visit. I knew the underwear would come with a carton. And not just a carton of the cheap-ass Kibbutz cigarettes I could afford. She’d bring L&Ms, my favorite. If she was feeling completely guilty for this, my most recent crash landing, she might even spring for Marlboros—but that would take a good bit of guilt, and really, I’d be happy with the L&Ms.

I’d just finished my second cigarette when Luba leaned out the door.

“We’re walking down the hill,” she said. “You ladies care to join?”

I looked at Faith.

“Yeah, cool,” she said.

“Am I allowed to?” I asked, suddenly worried I’d be left behind as soon as Luba remembered I was under watch.

“As long as you stick next to me, yes,” Luba announced. She smiled and closed the door.

“You’re gonna love this.” Faith said. “The hill is gorgeous at sunset. We try to do this a few times a week. It’s a bitch climbing back up—which is why we don’t do it every day.” She got up, grabbed her smokes and then my hand.

The hospital ‘campus’ took up the entire, steep hill. The upper part held the adults’ divisions, and the midsection held the outpatient offices. We were heading down, where I hadn’t been yet. At the turn past the gated entry, stood a two-story house. It looked like something out of *Gone with the Wind*. I couldn’t quite figure it there in dusty central Israel. I turned to Faith and pointed at the building, making a confused face.

“Oh,” she said. “Gorgeous, isn’t it? That’s where the day treatment patients meet. It used to be owned by some Arabs. The tiles on the inside are all mosaic. It’s *unreal* in there.”

“How do you know so much?” I asked.

“Show y’later.”

Luba marched at the head of our gaggle of twenty—all females. I turned and got my first real eyeful of Nes Tziona, the town. From the hill, I could see as far as the beach to my left and up to the Universe Club, a haven for Israeli bulk shoppers, on my right. It sat in the middle of an industrial park with a huge sign in English that flashed orange and green. I turned toward the sea, and watched the sun go down as we walked. Nes Tziona means, loosely, miracle of freedom. It’s a tiny town an hour or so South of Tel-Aviv. The buildings crowd together like children huddled against the desert outside the city line. The real desert’s not that close, but the close one was desert enough for me. It had taken me a while to get used to Israeli cities. The bigger ones are dominated by

apartment buildings. The smaller ones have a better mix of old apartments and even older cottages. Dust covered every inch of Nes Tziona. It was a miracle anyone wanted to live there.

Lost in my thoughts, I nearly screamed when Faith sauntered over and slid her hand in mine. I looked up and forced a smile. Most of the girls were walking arm in arm, with two holding on to Luba like third-graders with a favored teacher. Faith asked if I was signed up for occupational therapy. I told her I'd asked to be put there so I could knit because they wouldn't allow me to knit in my room.

"Guess they're worried I'll find a way to murder myself with plastic needles," I said. "Too bad I'm not that creative."

"You could shove them up your nose and into your brain," Faith said brightly.

"Glad you don't knit," I answered.

"Teach me?" she asked.

"Naw, I better not. Besides, it's seriously uncool to knit."

We both laughed. When we reached the bottom of the hill, I looked ahead and saw a swing set.

"Hey!" I yelled running for it. "Let's swing!"

Faith sped up and grabbed me by the elbow.

"No, Nomi," she whispered in my ear. "Those are for little kids."

I looked closer and realized the swings were built for small children. Luba came up and took me by the hand, slowly turning me around and facing me back up the hill. As she walked with me, she explained, "The swings belong to the school. The school goes with the children's ward. Children."

"What could kindergartners possibly have to get depressed about?" I asked.

"Hmmm," was all she offered in response. Then, "You know, part of the reason for this walk is that sunsets provide naturally occurring Lithium to the body. You should watch more sunsets—even when we don't walk. 'Kay?"

Luba walked past me, pulled on by the two girls who had been holding on to her. One of them shot me an angry look as she reclaimed the nurse's left hand. I smiled. As we headed back up the hill, I fell a little behind the group, lost in pictures of little children, of me, yelling and laughing, crying and jumping and saying I wanted to die. My head swirled with my sisters' voices; the neighbor boy's face looming over me. I held my breath trying not to remember.

"Don't worry about it too much," Faith said. "Don't worry about them."

"Why aren't you there?"

"Ah, the privilege of parents with money; I told them I wouldn't agree to come unless they had me in the adults' ward. Mom got the docs to agree. So long as I *behave like an adult*, I get to live like one. A crazy one, but with no babies to bug me."

She had slowed down to walk with me. I gave her a slow smile and said I was fine. We caught up to the group, and I could hear Luba telling the girls on either side of her that the orchard behind the main building was over five hundred years old.

Faith whispered in my ear, "This is the walking back story. Every time. I think it's a pacing device. I know it's the only way I manage to get back up this hill."

She swung my hand to match her step. That's when I noticed the cypress tree by the gate. Faith walked over with me.

"It's a cypress, big deal. They're everywhere," Faith said as I pulled her to it.

"But they're good luck," I said. "You have to rub it. Find a good nubby spot."

"If I had only known cypresses were good luck, I could be a millionaire by now," Faith muttered.

"You *are* a millionaire."

"My *parents* are millionaires."

"Ok, then shut up and find a nubby spot and rub already," I said. She did. "Now make a fucking wish."

After exactly three days and the weirdest intake interview I had ever had with a supervising doctor, Luba walked into my room and announced I was cleared for 'real clothes.' I laughed and asked if she was sure I wasn't going to freak out from wearing non-polka-dotted pants. I was, after all, a psychopath. She put her hand on my head and pronounced me just a good kid with problems.

"You're no psychopath," she said as if speaking it would bring it about. "I saw your interview with Dr. Eban. You're saner than him." She patted my head and then touched my cheek in benediction. I wondered if it could possibly be that easy. I wasn't so sure, though she was right about Eban.

The interview had taken three hours, with an audience of every member of the medical staff—with the exception of the single nurse on duty at the desk. We were in a large conference room off the great room, just in case someone went whacko. After the usual idiocies, about my vision, my hearing, my general health, we had finally gotten down to real business.

"Are you depressed?" the good doctor asked.

"It's why I'm here," I answered, already feeling the passive-aggressive in me talking over.

"How long have you been depressed?"

"Dunno," I said. "I know I was down for a bit, and then the crash came and then I slept for about three days—or that's what my roommate claims."

"Do you ever hear things other people don't hear?"

"Yes," I said, and watched him smile smugly to himself, knowing he thought he had hit pay dirt, had finally found out the magical secret to my craziness. "I'm a musician. I hear music differently than most people—more fully, really. I also hear better than most. For example, I just heard the man in the third row try to suppress a

sneeze," I continued, pointing lazily toward the theatre of white clad folk all gaping at me, suddenly not so sure of themselves. "But you want to know if I hear voices in my head, and the answer is no. I'm not schizophrenic."

The interview went downhill from there and I can't say I was not responsible for the degeneration of the exchange into a pissing contest. But then, I figured, any man who needs to have a pissing contest with a crazy woman who'd rather be dead probably should be working with crazies. At least he can be fulfilled.

"Oh, very good," Dr. Eban said in a tone even more patronizing than before. "So you know schizophrenia. What else do you know?"

"I know that I'm a manic depressive—and don't even try because I refuse to be called bipolar," I started, trying to seem detached from the situation, though I was getting angrier by the moment. "I know that I'm down right now and unless you fix my meds I'll be in a black mania soon. And I know that I know my body, my mind and what's happening to both better than you possibly can. Any other questions?"

I told Faith all about it later in the smoking court. She laughed so loud and so hard, she actually snorted.

"You made Dr. Eban look like an idiot in front of his staff," she practically choked on the words. "Ooooh . . .you know, *they* probably loved it, but he's going to get his revenge."

I shrugged and lit another smoke.

Two days later, Luba was dispatched to my room.

"Well," she said. "Mine was the deciding vote. You get to go home for a day next weekend."

I nodded, already hearing my sister's jokes about loony bins and day-passes. I took off to find Faith.

“Man, I’ve been here three fucking months and *you* get to go home for the weekend?!” Faith was on a tear. “Kus’emok! I haven’t even *seen* my sister and you’re bitching to me about getting to go.”

I shushed her, afraid Luba would hear and come threaten us with the quiet room.

“You don’t get it, do you?” I asked. “I don’t want to go home. If I wanted to be there, I wouldn’t be here.”

“What could be so bad about a weekend away from Luba?”

“Faith!” I was whining. I could hear it. “They call me psychogirl. They think it’s funny I’m in here. My parents don’t stop them, and if I get upset about it, I’m being ‘overly-sensitive’ again and then I have to shut up.”

“Big fucking deal,” she said, rolling her eyes then looking down. “What are you *really* afraid of?”

I sat on my bed and stared around the room. Here, it didn’t matter that Anat stayed in bed masturbating all day. Here, no one cared if I threw my chit all over the floor. Well, they cared, but only enough to make me tidy up a bit. Here, I could rock myself in front of the TV all day watching *Perla* reruns and no one would change the station or call me a freak. Here was safe, and there . . .

“I guess I’m afraid of being like them,” I finally said.

“You’re in no danger.”

I giggled. Faith laughed. We started laughing harder, and then I snorted. That got Faith laughing so hard she turned red, which I found even funnier. We were flopped out on my bed laughing so hard Anat started screaming at us to stop. That didn’t help, of course. Luba came in, and in a very serious tone told us we were disturbing the depressed girl two doors down.

Stifling laughter and shaking violently, we nodded and agreed to keep it down. Faith put her arm around me and gave me a peck on the cheek. "Don't worry bubbale', you'll do fine. And when you get back, I'll be here and we'll live happily ever after."

That afternoon, I sat on my bed re-reading the only English language book on the ward. It was just as bad as all the Hebrew ones, only easier for me to get through. The array of reading materials available was enough to make anyone want to slit her wrists.

Faith sauntered in and sat down on my bed. "C'mon," she said. "We have to go now. They're changing shifts."

"Go where? Why?"

"The haunted mansion," she said. "C'mon!"

Faith grabbed my hand and pulled me to my feet. I was already used to giving in to her whims. We walked toward the phone room, where Faith casually turned, opened the door for an incoming doctor and walked out. I followed. It was too easy.

When we got to the mansion, Faith climbed up the side trellis to the front porch. I walked around the front and up the stairs. Faith leaned against the front door, grabbed the handle and put her shoulder against the glass insert. She jiggled the handle, jammed her hip against the door, and then suddenly pulled up and pushed in all at once. We sauntered in. Looking down and then around me, I found beautiful arabesque mosaics in tile. The walls, floors and some of the ceilings were covered in them.

"This was a harem," Faith said her voice filled with awe. Bullshit, I'm sure, but a segue is a segue.

"You know," she said. "I loved Sima. I thought she was going to save me. I thought she loved me. Men are bad for your health, but women will tear your heart out."

"Have you always gone for women?" I asked. I hadn't yet learned the Hebrew word for Lesbian—as if Lesbit was so tough to learn.

“Pretty much since my crush on Miss Hoverski in the first grade. I don’t know. I dated a guy or two in high school, but they were more like brothers to me. I couldn’t get it up for them.”

I laughed.

“Seriously. I just never understood their fascination with their own dicks. Women don’t do things like that. They’re nurturing, and they know how to love. A woman knows what a woman feels. She can sense when it’s real. A woman can cradle you and love you at the same time. A woman can make you feel like no man can. Women just take better care of women, that’s all.”

“Yup,” I said. “And then they dump you off in the ritziest section of Tel-Aviv knowing that cops are nurturing and will take care of you too. I mean, why keep all the love to yourself when you can bring some to the police? Women share like that.”

She walked out, leaving me to find my own way back to the ward in the dark.

I stood in the silence for a moment, sorry I’d pushed her button, but still feeling justified.

As soon as I stepped out, I realized the dark had deepened and matched that inside. Turning in what I hoped was the right direction, I walked back to the ward, slowly, keeping on the pavement.

When I got there, I found the door to the smoking courtyard locked. I walked around to the main entrance of the ward and told Luba I’d gone outside to smoke and gotten myself locked out. She smiled and let me in. But I wasn’t sure she believed me.

I walked to my room and buried myself under my covers, knowing I could never dig in deep enough, but that I’d better get used to being on my own.

The next day, after lunch, Faith challenged me to a duel. We sat across from each other over the chessboard. I had yet to forgive her for abandoning me. I chose black, and we settled in for a long game. I like queen's openings. Faith preferred to start with her king's knight. It pissed me off, but only because I have no defense for it. I made up for my stupidity by playing for blood. I sacrificed my queen for hers. She set me up to go bishop for bishop, probably knowing I couldn't resist. I lost game one. I took a deep breath and decided I needed to control my feelings. We weren't going to talk about it, so we might as well play it out. But I was not about to lose.

Two hours later, we were on game five, and two for two. The ward watchers were gathered around us, betting their smokes and chocolate. I was sweating. Faith was cool. I had just castled, a move I hate having to do, when Luba walked up and announced an impromptu sunset walk.

"A'ight," Faith said. "I'm bored anyway." She stood up, stretched and swept her hand across the board scattering our little soldiers everywhere. Luba gave her a dirty look but didn't say anything. The watchers scrambled to the floor as if picking the pieces up would get the game back to where it had been. I smiled, and Faith winked at me. I realized neither of us would have won this fight. "Yeah, let's go," I said, and headed to the door, not even thinking of going to my room to change my slippers for sneakers.

We began our march down the hill toward the sun. At the gate, we stopped while Luba schmoozed with the guard. I sat down on a bench, my feet tapping to some nonexistent rhythm. When we got up, my left slipper fell off. I stopped to put it back on, while the group continued. Hurrying to catch up, I shuffled to keep from losing my slipper again. Suddenly, Faith reached out from just beside me and pulled me through some bushes to the other side.

“What the fu—” I started but she reached up and kissed me. Long and soft. I relaxed into her, and she put her arm around my waist. Her other hand went into my hair.

“Wait!” I said, pulling back. “Look, Faith, this isn’t right. I can’t. I’m not. I’m . . .” Faith put her hand on my mouth.

“Look,” she said. “I can give you what he couldn’t. We can move to Eilat together. I’ll get clean. I’ll take care of you. You’re out of fuel, burned out. And I’m a station on the road you’re traveling. Why not stop? I’m good for you. You are so cool, so clear. You know where you’re going. We could make it together. We could be a family.”

“No,” I said, feeling strangely out of breath. “No, we can’t. And we can’t be here now. If Luba finds us we’re both dead meat. I’m just not . . . I can’t . . . Patients can’t get involved. I mean they won’t even let us near the men’s ward. You know that. You know they’ll put you in the quiet room, and then the kids’ ward, and Faith, I just can’t.”

I pulled away, walked back through the hedges and saw Luba headed back with the flock of girls in tow. I sat down surreptitiously and began rubbing my ankle. When Luba got to me, I told her I’d fallen and twisted my right ankle. Faith had come back through the hedge and was helping me dust off. Luba helped me stand up and then she and Faith walked on either side of me with my arms around each of them as I tried to limp evenly—tried to focus on my right ankle and will it to feel swollen. When we got to the ward, Luba sat me in the great room with my foot up on a chair and went off to get me some ice. Faith sat next to me telling the other girls all about my fall. The story got more and more dramatic as it wound on. I marveled that no one seemed to notice my ankle was not swollen or red.

A half hour's worth of tears and attention later, I was in my room. Faith sat on the edge of my bed, holding the useless bag of ice on my perfectly good ankle.

"Y'ever read Kafka?" she asked as if nothing had happened.

"Only 'Metamorphosis,'" I answered, shaking off the bag and getting up to pack for my day at home.

"I liked that one."

"Everyone does."

"But you have to read his other stuff. You think you're crazy, but really everyone is, and you're just more aware. You know the world is gray. Kafka knew that too. I think artists have to be a little outside reality. It's the only way they can look back at the rest of us and hold up a mirror. They can't be totally gone or they have no context. They have to have one foot in society and one foot out."

It took a moment for me to remember how expensively educated Faith had been. But then, I'd heard all this before. Pain and art, art and pain. It was no excuse to get caught up in pain. I told her so. We argued the finer points of insanity and drug use while I packed, forgetting that this was no lit class, and we were no artists. I hugged Faith goodnight, and settled in for a sleepless eight hours, awaiting the hell I knew I would face at home.

In the morning, I walked outside with my backpack on to wait for my mom. I passed Tamar who sat waiting for her mother and daughter. Tamar was schizophrenic and practically lived at Nes Tziona. She saw her four-year-old daughter once a month. Suddenly, I heard her start to wail. Turning, I saw her mother walking toward her alone, already trying to calm her.

"I forgot. I'm sorry. I forgot. She can't come in. I didn't register her. I forgot."

Tamar's mother tried to hug her, but Tamar's screams got louder and she began wildly flailing. She kicked and hit her mother. A nurse came running outside with a

syringe in hand. She stopped to decide on an approach, choosing to try to come in from behind. I knew where this was headed.

As the nurse tried to get a good angle on Tamar so she could stick her, Faith rushed out and jumped the nurse. Tamar stopped in her tracks. Faith bit the nurse on the neck, and started yelling profanities in English and Arabic. Faith's arms were locked around the nurse's neck and her legs around her waist.

"Fucking bitch! Whore! Cunt! She wants her daughter, you asshole. You want to take someone on? You take me on, you piece of shit." Faith continued, grabbing the nurse's hair and pulling it to punctuate her curses.

Two orderlies, who had run out to help with Tamar, found themselves taking Faith down instead. As they grabbed her, she leaned her face between their shoulders and winked at me, the same slow smile on her face as on the day we'd met. Tamar was sitting quietly, spent, on the bench she had been waiting for her mother on. Faith was still yelling and flailing when my mom pulled up in her car and honked. I walked over and got in the car, not wanting to see Faith dragged off to the quiet room.

"Let's go," I said in monotone. I thought I could still hear Tamar's wail as the car pulled past the turn in the hill.

3. CHAMSIN

Nomi was at the small table in the one-but kitchen, as her mother would have called it, cutting up cucumbers for the salad when she heard a muffled animal sound. It took her a moment to identify it as braying. She walked out to the salon, where Gal was watching TV.

“Did you hear that?” she asked.

“Yes,” he answered without looking up. “I told you there was a donkey upstairs.”

He had. She had thought he’d been joking, was being understanding about her restless nights, her tossing and turning. She thought he was trying to play off her exhaustion and his, both.

“It’s coming from out back,” she said, walking swiftly through the salon to the enclosed balcony facing the parking lot. Since neither had a car, they rarely went to the back of the building.

“It’s not out there,” Gal said when he heard her opening the slatted shutters.

Nomi looked out and saw only cars. “But it has to be.” She pulled the shutters all the way and leaned out as far as possible to see the entire lot. The heat was beginning to dissipate, but there was still no hint of the slight relief the temperature drop would bring. The sun flashed in her eyes. Then she heard the braying again. With her head out the window, she could tell the noise was, actually, coming from above them.

“It’s *chamsin*,” she said flatly. “And we’re going nuts,” she said. “Apparently, it makes everyone crazy and the longer it lasts, the crazier—even if you’ve lived here all your life.”

Nomi stopped in the salon on the way back to the kitchen and stared at her husband. His dark features didn’t even change. He sat, hunched in the way tall people learn to slouch, still in his slacks and white shirt from the clinic. He smelled slightly

medicine-y and a little like cleaning fluid. His smell was one of the hardest things to get used to. She'd never noticed it in New York, and here in Israel the heat made it float about him like an astringent fog. Finally, he looked up at her, his grey eyes nearly blank.

"And?"

Nomi couldn't believe she might know something Gal didn't. She really wanted to pretend she'd known herself, but decided, instead, to relate the phone conversation she'd had with her father that day.

"Abba, there really is something to this China heat," she had said.

"China, Nomi?" Her dad managed through laughter. "How do you know how hot it is in China?"

"It's *chamsin*. Cham as in hot, and Sin as in China," she said as though she were explaining it to a child, and not to her father who had grown up in this country she was now learning to call home.

"Ai, sweetie, it's not about China," he said, not quite finished laughing. "It's from *chamatan*, *chamishim*."

Nomi thought for a moment, trying to make the connection.

"What's fifty got to do with it?" she finally asked.

"Nomi, *chamsin* is wind and sand coming up the crescent off the Sahara. But the official Hebrew for it is *sharava*."

"Like anyone uses official Hebrew, Abba. Explain the 50."

"Well, that's about how long it lasts," he said. "Fifty days."

"Fifty days!"

She heard her mother yell, "Tell her that's why we left that godforsaken place!"

“Yup. As a matter of fact,” her father began in his I’m-about-to-share-trivia voice—a voice that signaled long stories, weird occurrences, and often impossible history that was always true. Nomi loved this voice; these tidbits. “In Turkey there used to be a law that if the *chamsin* lasted more than fifty days a man could kill his wife with impunity. I don’t know if it’s still on the books.”

“So you see,” she finished. “It’s just the heat. Actually, the heat and the sand and stuff.”

Gal had been chuckling quietly throughout the retelling. He was always amused at her language gaffs.

“Murder.” Gal said as though appraising the possibilities.

“Well, not *just* like that. *Chamsin* will drive you nuts. It could make you kill whomever you live with. But you only get away with it if you’re a man.”

Gal laughed again, this time louder.

Fifty days. She thought. *I might just kill someone by then.*

“Bet you’re glad we don’t live in Turkey,” he said with a laugh.

“I could take you,” she said and jumped in his lap on the sofa, grabbing his ears and pulling him to her.

“Well, you can certainly have me,” he said. “But I doubt you could take me.”

With that, he took her arms and pinned them behind her back, then pretended to kiss her but stopped just shy, teasingly.

They skipped dinner, opting for the shower where they’d started having sex since the *chamsin* had started. Nomi hadn’t ever thought of lovemaking as gritty and chaffing before, but this summer was changing everything in her life.

By 2 am, the weather had cooled enough for Nomi's tossing to stop. She was nearly asleep when Gal nudged her and whispered, "Well, did you hear that?" She had.

"Fucking donkey," he said. "Who the hell keeps a donkey in an apartment?"

"Ignore it," she said and rolled over. But the braying continued and she didn't sleep all night, though he did. Instead, she lay in bed, listening to the window unit hum uselessly, wondering about the donkey and listening to Gal's snoring.

They had been married for only three months, and in Rishon L'Tzion for only one, but everything had taken on a dusty, tired, air of ancient permanence.

When she finally got up to go to work, she felt as though she'd been awake for days. The early morning cool was starting to dissipate when she got off the bus at the school, lesson book in hand, and walked in for her last summer prep day. She was among the first to show up and was proud of herself. She had done it to beat the heat, but knew it would look good.

Her adjustment had been slow. Her linen suits soon gave way to lighter clothes, then those gave way to fewer clothes. Her meticulously conservative, child-oriented, "I'm a teacher" wardrobe was slowly replaced with thin, nearly transparent cotton dresses she purchased at the flea market.

Nomi'd figured she'd change back into teaching clothes by the time school started—after *Rosh Hashanah* which fell in late September this year. *Chamsin couldn't last that long*, she reasoned. *It'll be over by the first of October*. But now she wasn't so sure. No one commented on her clothes at mandatory teachers' meetings, or when they stopped by to welcome her as she decorated her classroom or made lesson plans she wasn't sure she'd be able to carry out. But she noticed the difference. Her colleagues were slowly

dressing more lightly as well. Maybe she was just ahead of the heat curve, being new to this form of hell. Even the principal was wearing less and less.

By the third week of *chamsin*, she wasn't even starting the day feeling fresh. The lightest, shortest dress was too much of a burden to carry. Her hair was filled with sand. Her skin was gritty. On occasion she could feel it in her teeth. She was permanently exhausted but listless, and her tossing and turning was getting on Gal's nerves—though he would never say so. But Nomi knew she was wearing thin on him—he was certainly wearing thin on her.

At first they had been playful about the sacrifices each had made. He told her he had sacrificed more by moving from Tel Aviv to Rishon for her job than she had by moving from the US to Israel for him. Sometimes she agreed. But then she'd point out that she had never intended to be a teacher and was doing it to live in Israel with him even though they could live comfortably in the states. He'd kiss her and tell her of all the wonderful things he had given up to be with her. New York City was an exciting place, but it couldn't hold a candle to his Tel Aviv. The Village and Soho were mere shadows of Shenkin, and even the immigrant neighborhoods of New York—which to her always meant the lower east side—was nothing compared to the ever-changing border between Tel Aviv and Yaffo.

"You gave up a green card to live in Rishon, thirty minutes away from your beloved T-A," she said. "Poor you"

"Yes," Gal told her, pulling her close. "I gave up the world for you. And *that's* how much I love you."

And though she argued and joked, for the most part, she agreed. She'd left New York, got out from under her mother, was fulfilling the dreams of her father, and was

still new enough in this tiny town to be enchanted with it—even though she knew it was small, provincial.

“You’re right,” she said, and laughed. “You do love me. How smart of you.”

And she loved him too, she thought; though sometimes she was unsure. He seemed to be the knight in shining armor she’d been promised (and once a year he was a knight in dusty army uniform—an officer at that—even if it was the reserves and every Israeli male did it until he was 55 years old). He was kind, he laughed a lot. He gave up his Tel Aviv for her. But what, she sometimes wondered, did he want from her? What would she have to give up?

She knew they had been in love, but her memories of the wedding were becoming more and more vague. Like the memories she now had of the small portion of her childhood she had spent in Israel, they were now filtered through stories of memories. They were taking the shape of what her parents remembered, what her thank you notes had in them, what the album contained.

Gal, too, seemed to be re-forming, transfiguring from the awkward, foreign man she’d fallen in love with in New York, to a man in his element. She needed him, now. And his transformation required that she become a school-teacher, the most readily available job for an American with her education, even if it wasn’t her first choice.

Here she was, nearly 28 years old, and still she did not know, was not absolutely sure of, who she was. And yet she did know, was absolutely certain, that she did not want to give up the who she might become. The doubts crept into Nomi’s thoughts during the day like the sand that worked its way into everything. She’d find herself at her desk at school, picking through *Learn Your Letters* coloring pages and thinking *He loves me, he loves me not*. And then, *I love him, I love him not*. Of course he loved her. That was a matter of fact. Simple. He said so, and clearly meant it. She was not so sure of herself, now.

At school that afternoon, thinking of the donkey, and Gal, and sleep, Nomi wiped her forehead with the back of her hand and then turned the page on the letters book. The back of her hand was covered in a fine, muddy grime. She looked at it, disgusted, and went to the bathroom to wash her hands and face for the third time that day. School would start soon. She wondered how she would handle it. Standing, staring at herself in the mirror, she saw herself bedraggled. *What a great word*, she thought. And then, *This heat is making me stupid*.

She'd expected that at least school would be better than home. The window mount A/C she had bought with her "immigrants rights" moved the hot air around. It was called an air conditioner here but was just a window box. Though most people on the Lower East Side didn't have anything but window boxes, Nomi's family had central air—at her mother's insistence. Window boxes just didn't seem enough. Now, here, even central air couldn't be enough. She wondered if her parents had really left Israel because of the heat. According to the research she did after talking to her dad, *Chamsin* usually came in spring, but could come at any time, and sometimes didn't. The lack of predictability disturbed her, but the idea of years off seemed to make up for it. Somehow she felt it could be like the lottery. And if everyone was driven dotty by it, well, at least it wouldn't make her feel like a foreigner as it had when it had first started and she seemed the only one taken by surprise.

Nomi decided to leave for the day. She had logged enough hours to make her boss happy, though the hours could never be enough to make Nomi comfortable with the idea of the first day of school. In the bus, on the way home, she pictured her first day hoping it would help her ignore the smell of sweat, hot breath, and exhaustion that took up whatever space the riders left open. Nomi wondered if it would be better to only use English, maybe not let on that she spoke Hebrew. A teacher of hers had done

the reverse in Hebrew Day School and she was in college before it occurred to her that he must have known English. Had it helped? She knew Hebrew from home, not school. She had no gauge. At her stop, Nomi cleared her sand-filled mind and stopped in the florist's on the way home.

It was Friday and she had two weeks off before the holidays and then school. The flowers looked sweaty and miserable. But Nomi had started buying Shabbat flowers her first week in Israel and would not break tradition for the damned weather. It was as close as she got to keeping Sabbath, and was likely to stay that way.

She and Gal were not religious and likely never would be. The major difference for them about Friday nights was that they always ate together. They often visited Gal's friends for the weekend, and sometimes Nomi's cousin, but they always ate together Friday nights. The rest of the week, Gal's work at the local clinic kept him at work late into the evenings and she preferred to eat early—especially in the heat.

"It's disgusting," Gal said as they sat down to eat.

"What? I thought you liked my pesto." Nomi said, suddenly defensive.

"Not that, the donkey."

"Who was talking about a donkey?" she was feeling as though she'd walked into someone else's home, appeared in some other woman's life in the middle of a conversation with no idea what had come before.

"The donkey is upstairs. I told you he was upstairs," Gal said, starting to seethe both at the donkey and her inability to follow. "It's unsanitary."

"But it's not in our apartment," she said, finally clicking into his conversation. "Who cares?"

"I care."

Gal worked on MADA ambulances once a month as a volunteer and as a clinic doctor the rest of the time. He sometimes spoke with the arrogance only a doctor could

manage. Nomi felt his status as doctor—Jewish doctor at that!—was the only reason her mother had agreed to the wedding in the first place.

She watched him eat his dinner as though it were a challenge to be overcome. He attacked the food, eating slowly, but methodically and with vigor. She knew he attacked his work in this way.

That Sunday Nomi had been up all night with a headache. Gal swore Accamol was just another form of Tylenol, but it didn't seem to have the same effect for Nomi. More importantly, she had let an entire day pass without drinking water. A good and bad sign, it indicated that she was getting used to the heat, but also that she was getting careless about the heat. She'd had Coca-Cola all day long. Coke tasted better in Israel; she was unsure why. It wasn't until after a wonderful dinner of pita with salads, the white yogurt-ish cheese called Eschel that Nomi loved, and fresh fruit salad that she started to feel the dull pain between her eyes. She tried to hydrate, lie down with a cold compress, even take Gal's pills, but nothing helped. She had a headache. At least she didn't have to work this week.

At 5:30 a.m., Nomi heard the braying and a man's voice. It was clearly coming from the parking lot. Nomi got up quietly, and walked to the salon. The dawn was cool, but already the feeling of the *chamsin* snuck into the house. The floor was gritty under her bare feet, the air already sticky. Her bedroom, with its window unit was the only space safe from the heat that would soon roll in. When she looked out the balcony window, Nomi saw a man harnessing the donkey to a large wooden cart that looked like a garage sale on wheels. As he walked out the back gate, she heard him yell "*Alte Zachen!*"

After Gal went to work, she decided to go to the *midrechov* to do the week's shopping and maybe find out from someone other than Gal what *Alte Zachen* meant. She knew it was Yiddish, and it was tough enough on her pride having to ask Gal for help with Hebrew. Somehow, though he was usually kind about helping her, it made her feel small, like a child getting a patient answer from an impatient parent.

The *midrechov* was two blocks away from her apartment and included usual midway fair and a few small stores around the piazza. Gal thought she was weird for shopping there. Israel had supermarkets, and he felt she was being silly for refusing to use them. But the supermarket was dirty, and the prices were outrageous, and the food was not fresh. She hadn't known what real vegetables tasted like until she moved here, and she didn't mind shopping outside at the local greengrocer if it was cheaper and fresher and the dirt was less noticeable—even if only because it wasn't fluorescently lit.

By the time Nomi got to the *midrechov*, her sweat had formed rivulets down her side and under her breasts. Her dress looked lived in. Her hair had frizzed. And she could feel that her eye shadow was resting somewhere near the bottom of her neck, which was where it usually ended up after melting off her face. She wondered how Israeli women manage to keep themselves so well made up. Nomi found a *makolet*—which she still insisted on calling a bodega—and bought a dish rag to wipe her face as she wandered about, not caring if it made her look like an idiot—or a tourist.

Nomi stopped by her favorite seller's booth. Mrs. Shterman was kind. "Call me Rina, sweetie," she'd said in English the day Nomi introduced herself in order to ask directions to the city's main bus stop. Behind her vendor's *duchan* stood a giant loom she worked on days she sold at the *midrechov*. Nomi often wondered where she kept it when she wasn't at the market. She also wondered about the numbers on Rina's arm. Her family had no survivors to speak of, and she wanted to know more about Auschwitz—the camp she must have gotten tattooed at. Rina, she found out later, lived two floors above her and Gal.

"Shalom, Rina, mah nishmah?" she called out as she approached.

"Ach, darling, I speak English. Let me practice on you," was the response Nomi got as she was hugged over the counter by the old woman. Nomi was starting to understand how her mother had lived here ten years and never really learned the language.

"Rina, how do you stand the heat?" Nomi asked, leafing through the hand-woven cloths on Rina's table.

"I don't. No one does."

Nomi looked around the *midrechov*. *"Looks to me like they do."*

"Sweetie," Rina said with a chuckle, *"You'll learn to fake it too."*

Nomi shrugged. Smiled. She realized she probably would learn to get used to it. *"It just feels like it'll never end,"* she said.

"Oh, that's the problem," Rina said. *"Sweetie, the longer you live, the more you realize that everything will end, like it or not. You'll be okay."*

Nomi smiled and then excused herself to go finish her shopping.

"Hey, sweetie," Rina called as Nomi turned toward the *makolet*. *"Come by this afternoon, maybe two or so."*

"Sure."

"That's an order!" Rina said raising her voice. *"Not an American invitation."*

Nomi smiled to herself as she finished her shopping. An American invitation. That's what Rina had called the false "we must get together" conversations people had. It seemed anything odd or rude or lazy was American. But, she was making friends. This was a good sign. Soon her interactions with Israel would not be completely dependent on Gal's social life—a few college friends and other doctors.

Two was the perfect time for coffee. Hot coffee on a hot day had seemed counterintuitive to Nomi and was tough to get used to, but she had found it was the best relief available. She was sure there was a medical explanation for why this worked,

and thought it must have to do with the difference between internal and external temperature. She knew Gal could explain but didn't want to ask. His tone would deepen, he would stand his full six feet, and he paced. The more involved the topic, the more he paced, as though he were reciting a med school lecture by heart. She sometimes wondered if he was making it all up. Gal never looked directly at her as he lectured. It seemed impersonal to her.

Two was also near the end of the midday break. Old-world Israel still practiced such breaks. The modern, business-oriented Israel didn't. Nomi had fallen in love with the mid-afternoon break and was glad her teaching days would follow this tradition. It was one of the better benefits of being stuck teaching little kids.

Nomi got home at noon. She sat, drinking a glass of water, and trying to cool off for a half hour before it occurred to her that the one thing her mother always said she loved about Israel was *sponja*, a middle eastern version of mopping that doubled as air conditioning. Not one to enjoy housecleaning, Nomi's mother nonetheless missed this daily ritual. The housecleaning would help with the dust *and* the heat.

Nomi filled a bucket with water and bleach, tied her skirt up at her waist, moved the furniture out of the way and poured the water on the floor. She let it sit there a moment, then began using her long-handled, rag covered squeegee to clean the stone floor. Then she wrung out the rag and used the rubber tip to wipe the water off the balcony's edge. Finished, she sat sweating on the sofa, taking in the swamp-cooled air of the apartment and her sweat.

Nomi showered for the second time that day, dressed in a clean sundress, and walked the two floors up to Rina's apartment. She was about to knock when the door opened and Rina turned back into the apartment telling her to come in. Nomi followed

Rina into the kitchen. Her apartment was just like Nomi's, and probably every other apartment in the building.

"You want *botz*?" Rina asked as she bent over her sink filling the electric kettle. Her perfect posture belied her five foot frame, making her seem much taller. Despite being, by Nomi's estimates, in her late sixties or early seventies, she moved with grace and an obvious strength. Her spiky silver hair and bright grey eyes made her look like a pixie, as though she might cause some trouble at any moment. Nomi had to think about the question.

"Did you just offer me mud?" Nomi asked.

"*Ach!*" Rina said and started laughing. "Not mud, mud. Turkish coffee, mud. They look the same, but I don't serve the dirt kind to guests." Her laugh was like Gal's whenever Nomi showed her ignorance; sweet, but with a hint of condescension.

"Sweetie. It's okay. I just forget sometimes that you're new here. We call it *Botz* because it looks like mud. Try it—but don't drink the grounds."

Nomi took little sips. Her father drank this kind of coffee. She'd always assumed her mother called it sludge just because she didn't like it. Nomi decided she didn't like it either.

"Sorry," she said, handing the oversized thimble back to Rina. "Nescafe, please."

"No apologies, sweetie." Rina answered and turned on the electric kettle for instant coffee. When it was ready, Rina set a plate of cookies on the table and the two settled in for a very long conversation.

It started with Rina asking all the questions. Nomi explained that she had left Israel as an infant, that her father was Israeli and her mother American. She told Rina about meeting Gal in New York and falling in love in a way she had never known was possible. Nomi told of a storybook love affair that led to the overly costly storybook wedding her father had insisted on, telling her boys get big bar mitzvahs and girls get big weddings. But as she spoke, Nomi realized that it all seemed far too storybook.

"I know I love him, or I'm in love with him, but sometimes I wonder if he wasn't just an excuse to come live here," Nomi said. "I've been wanting to all my life. And he's a real pain sometimes. He's kinda different since we made *aliyah*."

"Sweetie, everyone's a pain sometimes," Rina said, smiling. "And I'm sure you're different, too."

"Well, yeah, but I'm getting used to a new country, a new job," Nomi protested.

"And in the US, so was he."

Nomi stared hard in front of her, then looked down at Rina's arm again. She thought this would have to be the moment or she'd never have the guts to ask. Besides, she needed to change the topic of conversation to something a little less close to home.

"Can I ask you about your arm?" Nomi asked.

"Hmm," Rina said, massaging the numbers on her right forearm without looking up. "I guess; what do you want to know?"

"Well, I guess I'm being rude," Nomi started. "But, how old were you when the Holocaust started?"

"*Shoah*."

"Sorry, sometimes I forget," Nomi said. "Show-ah."

"Don't worry," Rina patted her on the hand. "We'll fix that American O of yours in no time."

Rina had been twelve when her family was moved into the Lodz ghetto. Her family was killed just outside Lublin in Majdanek, the camp she'd spent most of the rest of the war at, because of a misunderstanding—maybe.

"The guard looked at me and said, 'Adult!' and pointed to the right," Rina said. "I argued. I wanted to stay with my momma. I yelled at him, 'I'm 12! I'm only 12!' He just yelled 'Adult!' louder and pointed to the right. My momma reached over my little sister and shoved me to the right. She was sent to the left because she was carrying the baby. She was gassed that night. I was put to work."

"How . . . how did you survive?" Nomi asked quietly.

"I don't know how any of us did, sweetie." Rina said. "I was worried after the war, at first. I thought I couldn't possibly become a good person after all I had seen as a teenager. My mind was filled with murder and rape and the *asonot* I saw people committing—and sometimes did myself. I didn't think it would ever get better. But I came here, I met Meyer—you'll meet him, he should be home soon—and I went on with my life. And somehow, I managed not to be as destructive as I felt."

The two sat sipping their drinks for a moment. The silence began to fill the kitchen.

Nomi asked, "Do you have any regrets?"

"What an interesting question!" Rina said. "Why did you ask that?"

"I don't know," Nomi said, though she knew she had returned to their earlier topics.

"Yes, sweetie. We all have regrets. I don't live with mine." With that, Rina stood up and began clearing the dishes.

"I guess I should go." Nomi said.

"No. Meyer'll be home in no time." Rina walked to the balcony, leaned out, and then came back in. "As a matter of fact, he's on his way up now with Shraga. It was too hot for him to be out today, anyway. I told him so."

"Out? What does he do?" Nomi asked.

"He's the *alte zachen* man."

"Oh, yes!" said Nomi. "I had been meaning to ask you: What does that mean?"

Rina smiled like she had when Nomi had thought she was being offered mud.

"It's Yiddish for 'old stuff,'" she said. "He walks around Rishon selling and buying it, sometimes antiques he sells to dealers, but mostly just junk. If you want a good *sponja* rag that'll really get the job done, you ask my Meyer."

"Ok," Nomi said quietly.

“Don’t worry, sweetie,” Rina said noticing Nomi’s discomfort at having such an open conversation with someone she barely knew. “It’s okay. Maybe some other day we can talk about all that regret nonsense of yours.”

Rina hugged Nomi—and somehow it was all right. They would talk about regret, and she might learn something. And it was nice to have someone to talk intimately with—someone not thousands of miles away.

Meyer walked in, yelling hello. Nomi stood in the kitchen doorway, looking down the hall. Over Meyer’s shoulder’s, she saw a rope. Then she saw the donkey. This was definitely not just *chamsin*. Gal would say he’d told her so. Nomi turned quickly to Rina, “You’re the ones with the donkey?” she asked.

“I sure hope so,” Rina said. “Let me introduce you to Meyer, and Shraga.”

Nomi followed Rina into the salon. Meyer was already on the sofa in front of the television watching a cricket game, and the donkey was nowhere in sight.

“Meyer! Say hello to Nomi. She’s wants to meet you and Shraga.”

“What about Shraga?” Meyer suddenly turned and looked at Nomi. Just as short as his wife, Meyer looked like a tough man and emitted an energy that caught Nomi’s attention immediately. He was dark, though Nomi wondered if it was from the sun, and looked as though he did not smile often.

“I was just curious about him,” she said.

“Are you here from the *Va’ad*?” Suddenly Meyer was yelling. “Because I don’t care how many tenants complain to your stupid committee, he stays!”

Nomi was about to explain that she didn’t even know who served on the tenants’ committee; that she was new; that she liked animals. But he got up and kept hollering.

“My Shraga would bray if he was tied up downstairs. If you can hear him now, you will hear him downstairs. Too bad he bothers you. He’s family. He’s my living. You want to take a living away from an old man?”

The *alte zachen* man was getting angrier and redder. He was yelling faster than Nomi had ever tried to follow in Hebrew. And suddenly, she realized, he switched to what must be Yiddish—because she couldn't even pick up tiny words. Rina held his shoulder as though he might haul off and hit Nomi, who simply stood there. Paralyzed.

"No, no, no, no," Rina said. "She's just a girl from downstairs. She wants to meet him, pet him. She just wants to visit. She's American."

Suddenly, he stopped. "American?" He chewed on the idea and appraised Nomi. "She can pet him. No rides. She's too big." And with that he sat down and began screaming at the television.

Nomi had begun to get used to being defined by her American-ness. It was often an insult, unless she was talking to someone who wanted to practice English. She stood there, facing the *alte zachen* man, unsure of what to do next.

"C'mon, sweetie," Rina said, again grabbing her hand. Rina pulled Nomi down the hall. They passed a small room on the right. Nomi saw a bed, an armoire, and a small desk crowding each other, with a small path among them. Then they walked into the larger room; almost the size of the salon. In the room stood a squat, grey animal. It was chewing. The room had a slightly musty smell to it, but like the apartment, it failed to smell like animals—or dung. Nomi wondered how Rina did it.

"You can pet him, he's nice," Rina said, shoving Nomi toward Shraga. "Well, let's face it. He's not so much nice as he is too stupid to worry; too stupid to be scared."

Nomi walked up and petted Shraga between the ears, then realized his fur was so rough she'd have to scratch. She did, for a second, but then felt something weird and vaguely earwaxy under her nails. She decided it was time to end this part of the tour.

"How do you keep it from stinking?" Nomi asked Rina as they walked back down the corridor.

“A lot of chlorine,” came the answer. “And donkey baths; he really is stupid. Meyer hoses him down and brushes him before he comes upstairs. I rub him down with oils I get at the *Shouk* and then brush him again. Pampered donkey.”

They also laid down plastic sheeting on the floor beneath Shraga’s hay every day, Rina explained, to make cleanup easy.

Rina chuckled to herself at that. Then added, “Nu, enough of Shraga. We’re eating. If you want we can eat in the salon, but I prefer the kitchen when there are matches on. You know, he won’t even explain the game to me.”

“Gal won’t explain it to me either,” Nomi said. “Of course, I don’t think I really want to know. But I just think men need to feel like part of some fight. They need a TV to yell at and a team to yell for so they can feel like they’re Vikings. So beyond that, I don’t think it really matters. I like that I don’t have to watch and he doesn’t want me to.”

Nomi stayed until the end of the cricket game, since Gal would be downstairs shouting at the TV and she and Rina were enjoying themselves chatting. It occurred to her for a moment that Gal ought to meet Meyer since they both seemed to lose all awareness of the outside world when cricket was on. But she knew Gal saw himself as too hip to hang out with a crazy old man who gave the master bedroom to a donkey.

When she got downstairs, she told Gal about Shraga and Meyer, and how Rina kept Shraga’s smell from pervading everything (a minor miracle in her mind), and that Meyer liked cricket.

“But he can’t explain it either,” she said as they got ready for bed.

Gal shot her an ugly look.

She laughed.

“So when we’re ancient you can complain to your neighbors that you’ve been married 50 years and you still don’t know anything about cricket because you need me to explain everything to you,” he said.

“Did you just call me stupid?” she asked slowly

“You forgot to brush your teeth,” Gal garbled through his own toothbrush. “What kind of message is that for the kids?”

“What fucking kids!” she yelled.

“Oof, the future ones. It’s not like I snuck a couple of them into the house today. Just two. I know you don’t want a brood. Not even a far off future brood. ”

“GAL!” she hollered, feeling the weight of the hot air as it came out of her mouth. He stopped and looked at her.

“What?” he asked quietly.

“You just called me stupid.”

“No, I just tried to make a bad joke about not explaining cricket,” he said and kissed her on the forehead. “And you still need to brush your teeth. You really might kill me before the *chamsin* ends. Either you or that damned donkey.”

Nomi got out of bed and brushed her teeth, then washed her face for the fifth time. By the time she got back to bed, he was propped up and reading. She tried to do the same. But couldn’t. So she sat in bed with a book in front of her and thought.

She wasn’t sure she wanted kids. Israel *was* a great place to have them—there’d be good health care, good education, relatively safe schools, she’d get a serious cut in teaching hours and not lose any pay. That night she dreamt of short school days and high schoolers who spoke English as fluently as she did. She woke up soaked in sweat and feeling out of sorts.

The following Thursday, as Nomi fixed dinner, she heard the braying. It took a while to figure out why. She had been hearing it long enough to stop noticing. She walked out to the salon and realized the sound was coming from below. Nomi opened

the shutters. There stood Shraga, as Meyer brushed him down, talking to him. It was late for Meyer to get in, she thought.

That night, at about 3, she woke up to more braying—also below rather than above. Nomi walked out to the balcony and looked down. There they were, Shraga and Meyer, Shraga lying down on some hay and Meyer on a cot.

She didn't sleep that night; just lay there, worrying about them all, Meyer, Rina, and even Shraga—who probably didn't much care where he slept.

The following afternoon, at the *midrechov*, Nomi stopped as usual to talk to Rina, who looked like she hadn't slept either.

"Why were Meyer and Shraga in the parking lot last night?" she asked in greeting.

"Ay, sweetie, you wouldn't believe. We've been in this building for thirty years! Thirty years and those idiots take one liar's word over everyone else who's been just fine with it. There is no smell! I know there isn't, you know there isn't. Who would do this to me? And Meyer, ay, Meyer. He won't come in without Shraga."

"Wait, wait, Rina. Who did what? What happened? Did the *va'ad* do this? When did this happen?"

Rina stopped for a moment, then slowly, quietly, said, "Wednesday. They came and said someone can't take the stink. What stink? They said he had to go outside, that only as long as there was no stink, they let him stay. But someone complained. Ay, who would do this?"

Suddenly it clicked. Nomi thought of Gal and left in a hurry.

At home she sat in the salon waiting for Gal, piecing together the last week, trying to figure out when he might have gone to the head of the *va'ad*. She had no idea what to say. She just couldn't understand what difference it all made. When Gal finally came in, those were the first words out of her mouth, "What the hell kind of difference

could it possibly make to you?" She demanded in a far-too-high-pitched voice, already in the middle of a fight he hadn't been aware they were having.

"Hi to you too," he said and put down his keys. "Can I know why I'm being yelled at before I answer, or have you been studying interrogation with the *Mossad*?"

Gal chuckled at his own joke.

"Damn you! That's not funny *or* cute!" Nomi yelled. "You know what I'm talking about Shraga, Meyer, a smell that doesn't exist!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, kissing her forehead. "Sorry."

"Yes you do!" She was standing akimbo. "Shraga! Meyer! It's your fault they're outside!"

"The donkey? Yes. The old man? That's his choice," he said. "I shouldn't have to live listening to a donkey in my building."

"So instead of him being two floors up, he's one floor down—and against our wall. You think you won't hear him now? You don't care about that old man out there in *chamsin*?"

"I think I won't be living with an animal in my building, now."

"You are an asshole," she muttered as she walked past him and out the door and downstairs to see Meyer. Maybe he would come inside.

Meyer was not prepared to talk. Nomi asked if he wanted water; he shook his head no. She asked why he was outside.

"No one tells me my Shraga is not family. No one tells me I can't live with my donkey. I've lived with him for 30 years! What if he's kidnapped? How would I know he was ok? How would I make a living?"

"I'm sorry, Meyer. But don't you think it's a little hot to be outside?" It was 5:30 pm and still over 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

"Too hot for him, yes." He said nodding his head in the donkey's direction. "He needs air conditioning. He walks all over Rishon all day and can't even get a proper room to live in."

"Meyer, you need air conditioning too. You walk all over Rishon all day too. You should be upstairs with Rina." She considered pointing out that at his age, he shouldn't even be walking as much as he was, but knew he would not respond well.

"Listen, kiddo: This? This is nothing. A man losing his work? *That* is something bad. This is just a little heat. Moses lived in it. So can I."

"Meyer," Nomi said. "Moses at least had a tent. You have nothing out here but your cot."

Nomi wanted to pull the age card, but something about the way he was sitting on the cot and what she knew of Rina told her it would backfire.

"Moses didn't know from difficulty. You want proof I can survive the *va'ad's* idiocy? Here."

Meyer pulled up his right sleeve and pointed his forearm at Nomi. The numbers tattooed into his arm were faded, but still clear. She inhaled deeply and slowly to keep from recoiling. A wave of nausea hit her stomach. She began feeling lightheaded.

"I'm sorry," she said. But it wasn't about the numbers. She knew she couldn't apologize for those. She swallowed hard to keep the nausea down.

"Listen, *boobah*, they think they're going to win? I know from heat. In *selectsia* I had to stand with hundreds of men in the courtyard at Auschwitz for entire days waiting to be told whether I was still useful. They think they can push an old man around? I know what hot means. I know what *chamsin* is and it's nothing. Try August in Poland when you weigh so little you shouldn't be breathing, but you try not to sweat so

much that they think you're no good anymore. They want an old man to give up? This old man knows what it means to work. I am not giving in, and neither is Shraga."

He rolled his sleeve back down. They sat in silence for a while.

"Meyer, it's my fault. I'm sorry," she said.

"What, you complained?" he whispered and suddenly stood up over her—short but threatening.

"No. My no-goodnik husband did," she said, head down. "I'm sorry. But I want you to go inside. I'll try to fix it. Can you please go in?"

"No!" He yelled. "No one is getting the chance to steal my Shraga."

He yelled a little while longer, then sat down looking like a squeezed out rag. His shoulders slumped—an odd thing in this man who seemed to be permanently set in military posture. He looked down at his feet. Then he reached under the cot and pulled out a small bottle of water. Nomi watched as he took one small sip. He offered it to her.

"No thanks," she said, but then had an idea. "Meyer, Rina isn't sleeping."

"Ay," he answered.

"How about you go in and make sure she's okay. I'll stay with Shraga."

"Huh? Why?"

"Because it's my fault. Because I'm worried about Rina. Because maybe I can get Gal to change his mind if he sees me out here and not you."

"You sure? It's hot out here."

Nomi laughed. Then Meyer laughed.

"You're sure?" he asked again.

"Yes. I'm staying. You can go or stay, but if you stay you know Rina will never forgive either of us. Besides, she won't sleep until you go back. You know she won't. And then she'll be sick." Ah, guilt, an all-powerful weapon. Nomi had learned from the best; her mother.

Meyer got up and dusted off his pants.

"I'll have her bring you some dinner," he said and walked away.

Nomi sat, worrying he wouldn't make it up the stairs after having been in the sun all day and all afternoon. There was nothing for her to worry about. Meyer was a strong old man. He had been working in the sun all his life. She should have been worried about herself; she could barely sleep in an air conditioned room and now she had volunteered to camp out with a donkey. But the more she sat outside, the angrier she got at Gal, and the sand and barely breaking heat stopped mattering as much. She wondered how long it would take for him to notice she was gone.

Right as the sun was setting, Rina came out with some food and a sheet. Nomi sat and ate the small cut salad of cucumber and tomato with olive oil and lemon juice, picking it up with pieces of pita and adding soft white cheese. She saved the omelet for last. Rina watched her in silence.

At 5:30, Meyer woke Nomi. He and Shraga had to go to work. Nomi went upstairs to shower. Gal passed her in the hall, and didn't say a word. She wasn't prepared to start the conversation, so she went about her morning silently.

The silence continued for three days. Nomi only saw Gal in the mornings. In the evenings she took water and a book outside and waited for Meyer. He washed Shraga, brushed him down, and sat with them for a while, telling Nomi stories of his life and the *Shoah*, and how he'd gotten to Israel.

Soon he got up kissed Nomi on the cheek, and went inside. A half hour later his wife was sitting beside Nomi as she ate. That's when Gal decided to break the silence.

"You're insane!" he yelled down from our balcony.

"And you're a jerk!" She yelled back. "I'd rather be crazy than mean."

"What; you want to live in a building with an animal?"

"I've been living with you!" She hollered up. "And I don't want to do that anymore!"

They stared at each other. She suddenly felt it. This was how they stood. He above her, she always looking up, yelling, straining. And getting nowhere.

“Get out.”

“What?!?!” he screamed, his voice going up several octaves. “Over this? That’s just stupid. Who breaks up over a donkey? You’ll never find a man to put up with your craziness.”

“Crazy?” Nomi screamed. “You want to see crazy?”

Nomi turned to where Shraga stood, walked to his dung pile and picked up a large, nearly dried chunk. She walked back to where she had been standing.

“No, no, sweetie,” Rina said softly.

With aim she hadn’t practiced since high school softball, Nomi hurled the shit clod directly at Gal’s face. She would have hit, too, if he hadn’t moved.

“*Kus’emok!*” Gal yelled. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Gal,” Nomi yelled up. “Pack your things, go stay with your parents in your beloved Tel Aviv until you find a new place and leave me the hell alone. I’m tired of sitting out here in this heat! Get out of my apartment!”

“Your apartment, huh?” Gal yelled and slammed the balcony shutters closed.

Five minutes later he yanked them open and yelled, “you stay out there and sleep with your new husband, the donkey!”

Nomi turned to Rina, “Now I’m going to have to call my father and get half of six months’ rent. This’ll be fun. I think maybe he loved Gal more than I did.”

She laughed, but Rina just sat quietly.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked quietly.

“Because wrong is wrong, and I think maybe Gal is wrong for me. Or I’m wrong. But I don’t know anyone here. I barely know the only family I have here and they’re up north. Shit.”

Rina put her arm around Nomi and held her close.

"Ach, sweetie, how did you get so smart so fast?"

"Maybe it's the heat," Nomi said.

"You know, in Turkey, if the *chamsin* lasts more than fifty days a man can kill his wife with impunity," she said.

"My *abba* told me that too."

"You should hear Meyer when we near forty eight days—he keeps count. Uses it to excuse his strange behavior sometimes."

Nomi laughed. "Good excuse, I suppose."

"Make sure you give Gal a chance to fix this, ok?"

"Why should I?" Nomi asked.

"Because a man should not be measured by his mistakes, but by what he does after."

The two sat and continued talking until well after sunset. She would stay here until the end of *chamsin* if necessary. She decided not to mind. It felt like *sukkot*; the feast of tabernacles. Her family hadn't ever really celebrated "the feast of tents and idiots," as her mom called it. When Rina left, Nomi began talking to Shraga.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Leah F. Cassorla was born in Be-er Sheva, Israel, but only because the town where her parents lived was so small it had no hospital. It still does not have one today. Though her parents emigrated back to the US, where they were both born and raised, she chose to return to Israel in her mid-20s. Forced to return to the US three years later to allow her family to help her cope with chronic illness, she chose to stay and pursue writing as a full-time career.

Leah earned a BA in English on a Print Journalism track with a Creative Writing minor from Valdosta State University, and an MA in Rhetoric and Composition from the University of South Florida before coming to the Florida State University to study fiction. Leah is now starting a PhD in Rhetoric and Composition at the Florida State University. Leah teaches full time at Valdosta State, where she is thankful to be involved in the print journalism program and with the award-winning student newspaper.

Though many of Leah's stories try to deal with the issues of hybrid identity, and the stories contained herein draw on her own experiences as a K'tina Khozeret, they are, each one, completely fictional. Leah believes that hybrid identity (in its fullest sense of allowing a person to be so fully identified with two cultures that hyphenation is difficult because it requires choosing which identity comes before the hyphen and which after) is the primary identity form people in the 21st Century will have to deal with. She sees this as both a blessing and curse.