MOIRA LEVY
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE
STUDENT NUMBER: 3601670
SUPERVISOR: PROFESSOR JULIA MARTIN

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LOST ON THE WAY HOME

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Abstract

This is a novella about homelessness, and the forms of exile, loss and displacement that it creates. Based in South Africa and Palestine/Israel, it is a story about four men who all find themselves alienated and marginalised and who, in their different ways, find themselves lost in their search for a place to belong.

Reuben is the primary character. Estranged from the Jewish community into which he is born, he turns his back on apartheid South Africa, expecting to find an alternative home in Israel. But when he arrives there he encounters once again the same dark side of humankind that he thought he had left behind.

He is not the first of his family to be driven from a place he calls home. His grandfather, Sam, who has already passed away by the time this story takes place, experienced homelessness after Nazism forced him to flee. The novella opens at the moment when Reuben takes his son Dov to Israel as a young child. But a growing estrangement between father and son emerges over time, as Dov is fiercely loyal to Israel while Reuben becomes bitterly disillusioned. They find themselves pitted against each other politically, until the pathology of Israeli militarism drives Dov to a breakdown. Following Dov's own eventual personal escape into exile, when he decides he must dissociate himself from the Israeli Defence Force, he calls out to his father to rescue him and take him home. Finally there is Haroom, a young Israeli Palestinian whom Reuben befriends, who has his own story of rootlessness and the absence of belonging.

In *Lost on the Way Home,* the politics of oppression, discrimination, dispossession, and violent victimisation underpins each of the four men's individual stories. And despite their differences, all share the experience of being driven from their “homes”, or the communities or places from which they originated. It is through their individual relationships that they reach out to each other to find a place to share and establish an alternative to the homes they have lost. In the end it is left to Reuben and Dov to struggle to find a way of finding each other when they set off together on a desert hike with no destination and only the goal of escaping their pasts.

Key words:

alienation, apartheid, family, home, Intifada, Israel, Palestine, South Africa, war, Zionism.

LOST ON THE WAY HOME

1

Reuben's timing was all wrong, but he did not know that. Did anyone know, or was a whole generation in denial? The country's first ever right-wing government had been elected to power. That was a sign that should not have been ignored, but those things are often only seen with hindsight. And only by those willing to see. Economic slump, people in debt, struggling to get by. A shift away from the collective to an ugly individualism. He should have seen the gloss of socialism was getting a little rusty. Or a simple body count would have told him all he needed to know. But he wasn't counting or had lost count long ago. War, conflict, and their consequences affect only those they actually touch, leaving the rest to continue believing in their dreams. And no one believes more determinedly than those who have little else to dream of.

That was Israel in the late '70s, early '80s. When Reuben arrived at Ben Gurion Airport on a late autumn morning in 1985 he knew only what he had been told, and his mistake had been to believe it.

He would only look backwards, at the chaos he had left behind in South Africa, and he was confident that he was certain about one thing. He had to take his son away from all of it, before the anger peaked and swept them out to an endless uncertainty. And he knew something else too. He had a way out. Israel offered a home to anyone, as long as they were Jewish. The irony of that did not occur to him until months, possibly years, later. By then it was too late.

When Reuben walked down the steps of the plane with Dov on that surprisingly chilly morning in Tel Aviv he knew nothing of settlers crowding into the West Bank, armed soldiers guarding road blocks, body bags arriving from Lebanon, dark-skinned Jews being shunted off to distant border posts. All that he came to learn much later.

His only concern right then was that his child's warm clothing was packed in suitcases which were probably still in the hold of the aircraft. He was also aware of the unexpected cold. He thought the sun shone 365 days a year in Israel.

Dov had slept almost without a break on the El Al flight, direct Joburg-Tel Aviv, but Reuben had spent much of the night staring at the small figure by his side. The child's head rested on a blanket that Reuben had bundled into a makeshift pillow. He had placed his own blanket lightly over Dov, taking care not to wake him. Looking at the sleeping figure, Reuben

found himself wondering if his son was small for his age. Was a normal, healthy six-year-old supposed to be able to roll into such a tiny curl?

Watching the small rib cage rising and falling rhythmically was comforting though, and Reuben found himself matching his own breathing to it. He would startle if Dov muttered or shifted in his sleep.

Sometimes during the flight he would turn and look out at the night sky and see only his reflection in the plane window. Reuben was a practical man. He planned ahead. This was so unlike him, making the decision to leave in just days. Thinking back, maybe it had taken only hours. Or had he known all along that this is what he would do? Go to Israel. It was expected of him. Aliyah, to return to the promised land. In English it meant "to ascend". Now that he was about to set foot on it, he was unsure. Where was he taking his son? The dark silence of the night flight and his restless sleeplessness permitted questions that he had never asked before.

Even later, in the grey light of the Customs hall, as they waited for their passports to be stamped, Dov kept lifting dark eyes up to him. Reuben could not tell if what he saw in his son's face was the same bewilderment that he himself was feeling. He suspected Dov was wondering if Reuben knew what to do next. "Are we going the right way, daddy?" Dov asked the same question several times, but didn't seem to be expecting an answer. Reuben didn't have one. He remained silent and avoided looking at Dov as they passed officials who welcomed them with a guttural growl that Reuben only realised afterwards was in English.

He was in a line waiting to enter a country that had featured large in his past. But then it had been a set of ideas and hopes and assumptions and of course an unwavering conviction. He had been brought up with a concept of Israel that was somehow interwoven with the notion of "home". That morning Reuben realised with a shock that for the first time Israel was about to become a real country, an actual geographic entity, and that it was entirely unknown to him.

Could it be home, in the way that South Africa never had been? Everything was entirely foreign to him in the only country he had ever known. The loneliest place he had ever experienced was his own family home. As long as he could recall, it was Israel that was going to be his destination.

He remembered those family gatherings. As a child he would be in agony, dreading them from weeks ahead. He would always hold himself cardboard firm, refusing to give way to embraces from relatives he barely knew and turning away from lipstick kisses. He had sat still and wordless, squeezed uncomfortably between adults at the long table. They would talk

across his silent presence, sometimes leaning slightly forwards or backwards as if Reuben's thin profile disturbed their view.

There was only Sam, his grandfather. Together they would remain seated side by side on dining chairs long after the meal was over, watching the aunts and uncles, the cousins, distant visiting relatives squashed into easy chairs and comfy sofas, wheezing with laughter at old jokes and the same tales repeated every year. Sam was dour and long-suffering. He would sit in stony-faced judgement, looking down on the frivolous chatter, the excess food and inevitable waste. All the way home Sam would rant about capitalism, the greed of the ruling class, and how materialist they were, those people who were his family. Reuben felt grateful for his grandfather's complicity in his own isolation.

Sam would always say the same thing: "Do they think they are seeing each other off on the boat? Do they think they are never going to see each other again? They're going see each other tomorrow."

It always made Reuben smile.

The road home was endless and empty. Reuben would nod off as the car drove further from the city and along unlit roads past the string of what were in those days *dorps*, barely towns, set up largely to provide for the mines and the people who worked them.

It was a place of vast loneliness for those like Sam who had fled. Jews who had somehow stayed one step ahead of persecution, who found themselves in countries so different from what they knew, remained permanently adrift in a state of homelessness.

Standing in the airport queue, Reuben suddenly felt grateful to Sam for taking him away from the dark, two-roomed flat in Yeoville. It had been crowded before he was born. His mother shared a room with an aunt. When his cot had to be squeezed in as well, the bedroom door could not be fully opened. A baby, and she was not quite 18. The family's shame filled every empty space. As he got older his energy and endless restlessness could not be contained.

Reuben was seven years old when he was driven by Sam to the single room his grandfather occupied above the compound store, alongside the native location. Sam set up a camp bed for him, sent him daily to the town's single school where Reuben never learned to speak Afrikaans. Whenever he could, he roamed the veld until nightfall.

Sam didn't talk much when they ate their evening meals together, sitting at each end of a rough wooden table that took up half the room above the now closed and silent store. When he did talk, it was all about the workers, socialism, and the kibbutzim. That's what Reuben remembered most. Sam had nothing good to say about Israel, hated the Zionists, but

he never strayed from his roots in the Bundist movement. Left-wing, far left. Workers of the World Unite. That was the kind of thing Sam would go on about in a low mumble, so heavily accented that Reuben did not catch every word.

It was Sam that he was thinking of when they emerged into the lingering chill of early morning Tel Aviv. Reuben tried to smile down at Dov with some confidence. Sam always said the kibbutzim had shown the world how socialism was done. So with silent thanks to him, Reuben led Dov to a bus station. He wondered what Sam would make of this journey, another move in search of a new home. Did he once feel this way, all those years ago? And what would he make of Reuben heading off in pursuit of his idea of home.

For a long moment he looked in confusion at the tangle of routes on a brightly coloured map. Did such a small country need so many bus routes? He stepped sideways, and studied a timetable, relieved to find it was in English. Ten minutes later he found what he needed. A route that ended at a terminus alongside a kibbutz in the Negev. The bus would be leaving soon, giving Reuben no time to reconsider, had he wanted to.

At a booth he bought tickets from a woman speaking in a rushed mix of English, some Hebrew that he understood nothing of, and what he later realised was probably Russian. The elderly woman, wearing old-fashioned head gear that reminded him of the *doeks* worn back home, seemed satisfied with the handful of shekels he handed over. Bought at a Bureau De Change at Joburg airport the night before, Reuben had no idea how much they were worth. She didn't stop to count, offered no change, and handed over two tickets, gesticulating at the same time that he must hurry.

Reuben wondered if he had paid too much or too little, but she was pointing to a stop that he was relieved to see was close by. The bus's engine was already revving. He nudged Dov ahead of him with one knee, carrying a suitcase in each hand and a bulging rucksack on his back. They boarded, and immediately staggered as the driver took a sharp turn from the kerb, then stumbled into two empty seats near the front.

The bus headed south. Dov said little along the way, only twice or three times repeating his earlier question. "Are we going the right way?" This time Reuben would nod and smile in a way he hoped was reassuring. It seemed to be sufficient for Dov. He would turn back to manipulating a plastic super hero toy that he had removed from his own small backpack.

Focused intensely on his Superman, acting out fierce battles with imagined enemies, Dov sometimes showed an aggression that Reuben found discomfiting. He pulled a book out of his rucksack, but kept glancing at Dov by his side, wondering if he

was hungry or thirsty. Reuben realised he had brought no provisions. Later that day, he found a cheese roll in a pocket, still in its plastic wrapper. He must have kept it when his breakfast tray was removed on the plane. Dov ate it slowly, showing little appetite. Reuben kept returning to the same paragraphs. He couldn't remember much of what he had read before.

The bus halted only a couple of times, to let passengers off and take on more. Some hours later, shortly before nightfall, they pulled into a bus depot where the driver removed the key and opened his door in one swift movement. He hopped out without a backward glance and, walking fast, was soon out of sight.

Standing on the pavement, still feeling the shudder of the bus in his body, Reuben saw with relief a sign directly across the road. In Hebrew and English it read Kibbutz Ma'ayan Michael.

2

Reuben remembered little of his stay on the kibbutz. It became a space between the past and the rest of his life. His arrival would always remain blurred by panic, bewildering early days when he was put to work in cow sheds and on fields that needed harvesting, and left with instructions in broken English that made no sense at all.

The kibbutz seemed to have been cut out of the surrounding hills. Mountain tops had been levelled to make way for factories built to produce for local and international markets. Water, so scarce and precious in those parts, was sucked into a network of irrigation pipes marking out vast tracts under cultivation. Commercial farms had replaced terraced fields and uprooted generations of olive and citrus trees.

"We've greened the desert," was what he had always heard. But what he saw looked like nature captured and held hostage. The ancient hills had been excavated to make way for banks of identical settler houses, connected by an elaborate network of roads. Scars of asphalt were designed to link settlements and divide Palestinian villagers from each other and from their fields.

There was something else about the kibbutz. And he identified it within days of his arrival. It started with a recalcitrant tractor that he couldn't get going. Cursing loudly didn't help. Neither did swinging down from his seat to circle the vehicle a few times, kicking each tyre in turn.

Then he noticed the labourer standing in silence a short distance away, his eyes fixed on the concrete floor at his feet. A Palestinian, no one he recognised, but there was something familiar about him. He was captivated by the silent patience of the man who looked up when he realised he had caught Reuben's attention. Reuben recognised the very poor whose dignity is dismembered by those who will not see it. It could have been a scene from his childhood. Apartheid South Africa was staring him in the face.

The man looked up as Reuben stretched out his hand, relinquishing the tractor keys and watched amid memories of discomfort as the man climbed up slowly, taking care to display sufficient subservience and mask his knowledge and experience. That would have given him an illicit authority. He sat uncomfortably in the seat of the tractor which Reuben had vacated. It took three, maybe four turns. The engine kicked into life. Then the man

climbed down, not meeting his gaze. Swinging himself into position in the driver's seat, Reuben knew for certain that what he thought he had left behind was with him still. Israel cast the very same shadows.

He tried focusing on the volunteers instead. Every kibbutz has them. Most are persistent wanderers, always on the search for something. The kibbutz provided them with no answers. It was just another stop before the next one. Watching them, as they explored and then left, made Reuben feel uneasy. At first he asked himself would he find it, what they all were looking for? Then he stopped asking and shifted his gaze elsewhere.

Then there were the genuine kibbutzniks. Dried out by something other than hard toil under a burning sun. At first he tried attending the collective meetings, the joint efforts at decision-making, but they were mostly conducted in a rapid Hebrew that he could not keep up with, even though he regularly attended the classes that were compulsory for non-Hebrew speakers. What he could follow seemed fraught with in-fighting. He gave up trying and also began to avoid the movies or lectures held weekly in the draughty communal hall.

He had a bed to sleep in at night, cooked meals, and a job to do, which was really all he needed right then. His single-roomed apartment provided all the modern conveniences. He liked to return to its solitude after long hard hours working with the cows from before sunrise, and driving tractors during harvest time. It left him too tired to think, and that suited him too. He started taking his meals late, when he knew most people would have left the dining hall, and returned to his room as soon as he was done, dropping off to sleep quickly in his single bed.

Dov was slotted neatly into his daily routine, in that gap between dinner and bedtime when all the kids from the children's section spent an hour with their families. Reuben never knew quite what to make of these interludes. Dov seemed equally puzzled.

Every visit would start with Dov tracing the same route through Reuben's apartment, painstakingly studying things that he was already familiar with. The spine of each book on the shelf, the stones Reuben had collected during his first weeks there, a lampshade, a print on the wall. It was a wintry scene of an old woman gathering wood in an almost bare field. Reuben had wondered if whoever had put it up long ago needed a reminder of another world that they had come from. He found it gloomy but never got around to removing it. But Dov seemed intrigued. He would stare at it, his hands clasped behind his back, as if he was at a gallery seeing it for the very first time. "What's that, dad?" he would ask. Reuben would look closely, trying to make out a new detail that had caught Dov's attention. Usually it was nothing at all, but sometimes Dov surprised him by spotting a detail in the picture that

neither had noticed before, maybe a bird or a tiny plant. Reuben would watch in silence as Dov performed a nightly ritual. He could only imagine that his son was making sure that what he still had of his father was safely in place. It would always start in the kitchenette with Dov switching on each appliance in turn. When he heard the electric kettle grumbling into life, or checked and felt heat emerging from the toaster, he would give a little grunt of satisfaction, sometimes accompanied by a nod, and click the switch off.

He would study the contents of Reuben's bedside table with the same quiet intensity, picking up each book in turn and quickly replacing them without showing any interest in their contents. It made Reuben wonder if Dov could read English, or even if he could read at all. But he never asked. The daily visits were conducted mostly in silence and Reuben soon accepted that Dov's life was closed off to him.

School, what he was studying, the games he played. Reuben knew nothing of that at all. He wanted to ask about the other kids in the children's section and the time spent in its adjacent brick school. Friends? Did he have any? Was there a best friend? Or a bully who bothered him? But something stopped him from asking. Reuben was left to hope that Dov had filled his life with people, but he couldn't bring himself to find out.

The short time left of the visit was usually spent with Dov seated on the floor close to the small black and white TV set, his thin legs bent at the knees and folded at each side of him, forming a neat "W". While Dov stared transfixed at the screen, Reuben in turn studied the boy. He would laugh when Dov laughed, clapped occasionally when Dov did. All he could do was stare at his son, trying to absorb enough of Dov's presence to last him until the next evening.

The winter, when it came, could mean no visit at all. Reuben would wait until it became clear that the children were not being let out that night. The rain was persistent and surprisingly heavy. He hadn't expected so much rain. Wasn't this supposed to be a desert? For months it never let up, leaving mud pathways and puddles. On the worst days, tractors were left in the shed and people stayed indoors and out of sight.

During winter Reuben would read. He would make his way through the mud and driving rain to the kibbutz library and would carry back to his rooms as many books as he could stuff into his bags. He took little care over his selection.

He needed only something to fill his waking hours on those days when the weather brought everything else to a halt. He would also sleep for hours and wouldn't move when he woke, staying where he was on the bed, staring up at the rough asbestos ceiling, the dripping rain beating out a maddening drum roll on the tin roof.

So where was the new Jew, he wondered idly at these times. The people he had been told about, strong and free, living off the land, sharing child care, running their collectives bycommunal decision-making, showing the world the real socialism? Reuben would think back to those monologues by Sam. He wondered if his grandfather had known more than he had let on or if he had been aware of nothing at all, believing everything he heard because he needed to believe it.

Reuben wanted to talk to the veterans, those who had arrived years before when the kibbutz was new. Had it ever been awake with possibility? The old people he saw intrigued him and he would watch them surreptitiously. There were few left and he found them strangely alike. Had the others left, he wondered, or got old and died at the kibbutz? On the whole they were grave and embittered, with little interest in talking about the past. He found them firmly bunkered in the present, tired and defeated.

One sat opposite him at the same dinner table every night. They didn't speak at all after nodding a greeting. They both came in when dining hours were nearly over and sat some distance from each other at the table, eating amicably enough in silence.

Only once did the old man speak. "Meir," he said, half way through the meal. His mouth was full and he carried on eating.

"Sorry," Reuben hadn't heard him properly, hadn't been expecting to hear him speak.

The man chewed slowly for a while, his head bowed over his plate.

"Meir, I said. My name is Meir," he said after swallowing.

"Oh, ja." Reuben nodded, then realised more was required of him. "I'm Reuben." There was no way to reach each other across the table to shake hands. Anyway Meir seemed more interested in his meal.

Meir finished eating in silence then sat back in his chair. "So?"

Reuben looked up at him. He had no idea what to say.

Meir nodded, studying Reuben with a wry smile. "So, you think you gonna stay?"

Reuben slowly chewed the bean stew he had just forked into his mouth. He swallowed, then shrugged. He said nothing.

Meir shook his head, but smiled with a grim satisfaction as if he had proved a point. "You'll leave. You all go. You young people. You know nothing, that's why."

Reuben didn't know whether to feel insulted. He finished his meal as fast as he could, pushed back his chair and stood, ready to carry his plate to the washing up sink.

"Sit, sit," said Meir. His accent was strongly accented, Eastern European, Russian perhaps.

Reuben stood for a moment, then hesitantly took his seat again. They looked at each for some moments without saying a word

"You young people," Meir shook his head again, the same dry smile fixed in place. "We fought for this place, I bet you have heard all that before. It's true, you know," he said, as if he expected Reuben to challenge him.

Reuben waited in silence, unsure how to respond.

"Now look what we have built." Meir nodded, then shook his head. "We were told there was nothing before we arrived. That's what we were told, and that's what we told others. But what was it all for?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Do you believe all of that?"

Reuben looked around. They were the only two left in the dining hall.

"Don't believe it, any of it," Meir said, his voice harsh with a gravelled edge. "Don't listen to anybody who tells you those lies."

Reuben wanted to leave. Meir was frail, shrivelled, but he scared him. It was not what he said. It was how he spoke, in a voice twisted with anger and disappointment.

"Yes, we fought, young man. What did you say your name was? Reuben?"

He continued before Reuben could reply.

"We fought, Reuben. It's Reuben, right? Don't believe them when they tell you we started this place from nothing. Why would we have had to fight if there was nothing here?" Meir lifted a gnarled index finger, shook it several times as if to make a point, and raised one eyebrow into a sharp point.

"Answer me that, Reuben?" he sat back, a satisfied smirk on his face. "Who were we fighting if there was no one here?" He nodded, satisfied that he had won an argument, even though Reuben had said nothing at all.

Reuben realised Meir was not asking a question. Reuben made no effort to respond.

Meir looked at him, then dropped his head again.

"Yes, we did. We fought. They were here. We chased them off. Night after night they would come. The fedayeen. We would shoot. They would shoot. I don't know if we ever hit anyone. It was dark," he shrugged. "They didn't get us, not one. Maybe they smashed a water pipe or two." Meir sighed slowly.

His eyes, when we looked again at Reuben were rheumy. He pulled a handkerchief from one pocket, slowly wiped his face. Could those be tears, from this tough old bugger? Reuben thought it unlikely.

"I wasn't scared. Never," Meir shoved the handkerchief back into his pocket. "I was a soldier, Second World War. Can you believe that, look at me now?"

This time he grinned self-deprecatingly, hands outstretched, as if showing Reuben what weapons he once had. They were now bony and wired with veins. Then he suddenly grew serious again.

"It wasn't what we wanted, what we thought. We expected something different." He nodded again, his eyes ranging around the empty room as if looking for others who were no longer there.

Reuben could think of nothing to say.

"You heard of Mapam?" Meir continued. Before Reuben could reply he went on. "Of course not. You young people. One day I will sit with you and tell you about Mapam. Its values. The ideas it had. Shook up everyone." Meir suddenly gave a cheeky grin. For a moment he looked younger.

"Arabs and Jews in one state. Living side by side. That's what Mapam tried to tell them. But they didn't want to listen. One day I will tell you the whole story. That's a story you will want to hear. I can see in your eyes, you want to hear what could have been…"

Reuben nodded, tried to say something, about the Zionism he learned of as a boy.

Meir butted in. "Never mind Zionism, socialism, all that crap. We thought we had it all planned. And now where has it all gone?"

His eyes continued to rove around the hall then he stood up abruptly. "All gone. Right-wing fascist morons. Look at the cock-up they've made of everything." It sounded like a soft growl.

He stalked out of the hall without saying goodnight. Reuben watched him disappear, a gnome-like figure swallowed by the dark.

The one-sided conversation left him unsettled. He wanted to tell Meir that yes, he had heard of Mapam, read something, an article in a very old magazine that he found in the library. A radical group, well past its heyday. Pretty much over by now, after splinter groups broke off and arguments emerged over ideological differences. It had been open to all, although Arabs hadn't joined in any real numbers. Still, it spoke of a one-party state for Jews and Palestinians. Heresy it was considered then and still would be now. Had Meir been active in Mapam?

Reuben would have liked to talk to the older man again. But that was the last time Meir took his place at their dinner table. The next night and the night after that, Reuben waited but he never appeared again. It was as if he had said what he had to say and moved on. At first he wondered if Meir now took his dinner at another time, had found another confused

new arrival. Maybe he saw that as his task, disavowing new recruits of any misplaced ideals that they might have had.

Reuben looked out for him all the same, as he walked to the milking shed, or across the fields. There was never any sign of Meir. He couldn't help wondering if he had died, perhaps that very night, after their conversation. Had he spoken his last words, and chose to deliver them to Reuben? He knew that was absurd, but could not bring himself to ask anyone what had become of Meir. He never saw the old man again.

3

The brief conversation with Meir, one-sided though it had been, stayed with Reuben. It also made him realise that it had been a while since he had actually talked to anyone, apart from mumbled greetings. The only thing anyone now said to him took the form of instructions that he still struggled to follow, even though he had picked up a smattering of Hebrew by then.

So when he heard someone speaking out loud, in the chicken run towards the end of the day, Reuben didn't listen at first. He thought the Palestinian labourer was talking to someone else, but realised there was no one around. He made out that the man was speaking in English, grammatically close to perfect but in a strong accent. It had been a while since he had heard English spoken. The kibbutzniks, most of whom could speak enough English, had given up trying to draw him into their conversations. It was an isolation that he had chosen, and it was familiar in ways that made it somehow comforting.

"You don't like the kibbutz?" The worker was indeed talking to him.

He realised he didn't know what to say. He had never stopped to consider what he thought of the kibbutz.

The man started up again. "Maybe the kibbutz is not for you?"

Reuben stopped what he was doing, not sure if he was annoyed or just surprised at the intrusion into his thoughts. It occurred to him that he didn't expect to be addressed directly by the labourers, certainly not with a question like that. The Palestinians employed on the kibbutz kept to themselves. Reuben realised he had never once spoken to any of them.

"Maybe when the Americans leave, you can go with them, wherever they are going. Maybe it will be a place that will make you smile."

Reuben studied the young man. He was slim but well built. Reuben watched in silence as the man continued scraping the day's chicken droppings with a battered rake.

"You speak English?" the man continued, conversationally. Then he stopped and stood up straight, holding the rake in both hands. He was unusually tall, clean shaven and he stood in silence, waiting for an answer. Reuben found he had nothing to say. He remained silent.

"Maybe you don't speak English," the man continued. "No Hebrew. I think no Arabic," the man smiled, shook his head. "Maybe you just don't like to speak." He was

looking directly at Reuben. “Or maybe you don’t like to speak to an Arab. Is that it?” His gaze was fixed on Reuben’s face.

“No, it’s not...No, yes, I do speak English.” Reuben realised he was flustered. This man’s blunt look was making him uncomfortable.

“First no, then yes. So what is it?” The man fixed his stare again at Reuben, but he was smiling in a way that made Reuben feel more at ease.

Reuben returned to his work, then stopped. “You speak good English.” He looked up at the man, who had also returned to his work. Something ironic emerged in his expression.

“I go to school. Of course I speak English. English, Hebrew, Arabic. And German.” He smiled broadly at Reuben’s bemused expression.

“German? You speak German?” Reuben was genuinely surprised.

“I know you Jews, you don’t like Germans,” the man continued.

“No, yes. But why German?” Reuben spluttered.

“I too don’t like the Germans, I mean the Nazis. For what they did to your people.”

Reuben stared at him in awkward silence.

“Yes and no. Is that all you say? Yes, no,” the man was laughing now to himself, enjoying Reuben’s discomfort. He bent back to his work.

“The Germans gave me money to go to school. Why not, I think. My father, he didn’t want me to go. He said ‘what’s the point of German? In Israel, of all places’.”

The man bent over his rake again, dragged it with firm, repetitive movements. “I said to my father, why not? If I don’t go, there will be no school for me, ever. This is better than no school at all.

“But school or no school, I ended up here, cleaning up your farm. There is nothing else for me. I must work for the Israelis. So now I can clean out the chicken shit in English, Arabic, Hebrew and German.” He laughed out loud at his own joke.

“My father said I could go. To Germany. For a year I could live with no roadblocks. No soldiers wanting my papers. But he was sad, my father. He wanted me to be a lawyer. Like himself.”

“Your father’s a lawyer?” This time Reuben couldn’t disguise his surprise.

“Yes, a lawyer. Working on land cases. Many cases. Fighting with you people,” the man glanced at Reuben, his face without expression. “Fighting for the land. Fighting to get the land back. The land. Our land, that your people stole from us.”

His tone was as measured as his expression, as he continued to scrape away at the concrete floor. Then he stopped suddenly and looked at Reuben directly for a silent moment, before returning to his rake.

Reuben looked around. There were some labourers at the other end of the shed. No one could have heard what the man had just said. He expected to feel indignation, but instead he felt only curiosity and a slight sense of unease. He realised he had never spoken to a Palestinian before, never had one talk to him in this way, not like this. He was surprised and wanted to hear more. He watched as the man continued his repeated scraping. There was silence for a long while.

"Where are you from?" Reuben eventually spoke.

"Sheik Dahr. You know it?"

Reuben shook his head. For some reason that he did not understand this made the man smile.

"All of us, us Arabs. We work in your kibbutz but you don't know where we come from. We come from Sheik Dahr."

He stopped working. Standing upright again he added, "I come from Sheik Dahr because I had nowhere else to go. You Israelis cleared us all out of our homes."

He glanced at Reuben this time. Reuben turned to his work, uncomfortable at the direction the conversation was going.

"I come from Jaffa. That's where I really come from." The man was staring at him now, not making any effort to work, resting one hand lightly on the rake. He watched Reuben closely. Then he spoke again.

"But I was born in Sheik Dahr. My father was a young boy when the Israelis came to take Jaffa. With guns and tanks. My grandparents packed up what they could. Not much. They thought they would be gone for a few days. No more. Then they would return to the big house that my grandfather's father had built." He stopped and watched Reuben, who carried on working, kneeling now on a small patch he had cleared.

"They never went back. Their house was given to Jews."

Reuben looked up at him. "What happened?" When there was no reply he asked again. "What happened to your parents, your grandparents?" His voice was soft.

"You don't know?" The man looked down at Reuben. "You don't know." This time it was not a question. Then shaking his head, he lifted the rake and returned to his task.

After a long silence Reuben stood up. "What happened to your family?" he repeated.

Still shaking his head, the man leaned his rake against the wall. He shook a cigarette out of a packet that he pulled out of his shirt pocket. He pointed the packet at Reuben. “You want?”

Reuben shook his head, watched as the man bent his head to drag on the cigarette. He inhaled, looked up and stared at Reuben through the smoke as he slowly exhaled.

“You really don’t know, do you?” he said.

He took another drag, then released the smoke with a sound like a sigh. He said nothing, pulling deeply again on the cigarette. Reuben waited, his feet planted firmly, one hand on his hip, but something in the man’s face made him turn away and lean against the wall. Had he expected an argument? Something in him gave way even before it even began.

“Tell me,” he said, looking down at his feet. “Tell me what became of your family?”

The drawn-out silence made him look up, meet the man’s stare.

“You do know, only you don’t want to. So you pretend you know nothing.” He paused, looked at Reuben for a brief moment, then lifted his gaze to stare out of the window behind Reuben’s head.

This time he sighed audibly, and something in the sound made Reuben sigh too.

“This land, all of it. It was part of our village. Of Sheik Dahr. Then you came, you people. You pushed us, pushed us up the hill, as you built your houses, your sheds, this barn.

“Who said you could take our land?” His voice was raised, but only slightly. He continued evenly, as if asking an everyday question.

“Our elders even tried to ask you. They came one day, to talk. They asked you ‘who gives you the right to build on our land, uproot our groves, tear down our houses?’ Do you want to know what they said, your people?” He was looking back at Reuben now, but Reuben kept his eyes fixed on the ground at his feet.

“They said ‘god’, your people. That was their answer. They said your god gave you this land. Long ago. Before we came.

“Our elders left you to your lies. Your god, he lied to you. And you knew that. But you chose to believe his lies so that you could keep the land and build this farm. This land, it means more to you than the truth. You know, in your hearts, that you took the land in exchange for the truth. But time always eventually chooses truth. You will see.”

Reuben turned his head as he heard the rattle of the man’s rake. He watched as he walked away without looking back, taking firm, measured steps.

The next day, on his way to the chicken coop, Reuben found himself near the kibbutz office. He hadn’t been there often since his arrival, but something made him push open the

door. The kibbutz manager looked up, clearly surprised to see Reuben, his cup of coffee halted half-way to his mouth.

It took a moment to request a transfer to duties on the field, harvesting aubergines. Once or twice after that he thought he saw the Palestinian man again, but at a distance, climbing onto a truck or standing at the roadside waiting for transport home. But he could not be sure, and anyway, he didn't know what he would say if they were to meet again.

4

Reuben began returning to the library, but now he walked rapidly past the rough wooden book shelves and stopped at the table stocked with newspapers. For the first time he began to read the Israeli dailies. He immediately noticed that there was something about the press that reminded him of the newspapers back in South Africa. His Hebrew was now fluent enough to know that the news was written in some kind of shorthand. The papers weren't telling the whole story.

He went back each evening, and left frustrated. He started hunting. He poked around in the storeroom behind the library and there he found back copies of old newspapers stashed away in boxes. He pulled them out with care. Some were already years old. They tore easily and were starting to yellow with age.

He found a three-legged stool under the table and sat down to read. There was something he needed to know. He had no idea then what it was. He knew only that there was more. The newspapers were stacked in no particular order. Whoever had stored these had made no effort to organise them. Most were from the early 1980s. He picked up the first issue from the nearest pile. It was a copy of *Ha'aretz* dated 11 November 1981. That night he read until the lines of print became blurred. The next night he returned, and the night after.

It became an evening ritual. At first much of what he read he dismissed as nonsense. But a picture he had never seen before was taking shape and he read in growing disbelief. He began to visit the library whenever he could take a break from work. In the storeroom he found a box of old copies of *The Guardian*, probably left behind by a travelling volunteer. It was easier for him to read in English and he went through them much faster. This was not a random collection of past newspapers. Someone had put together issues of *The Guardian* that featured articles about Israel. Each one had been outlined in a shaky ballpoint. The same pen had been used to underline paragraphs that left Reuben stunned. He would return to them and re-read carefully. These reports left little space for doubt, and he slowly gave way to a kind of numb understanding.

This was not the Israel he had been told of. Where were the stories about reviving the land, providing a home at last for the new Jew, who was strong, proud, but good-hearted? Instead he read about settlements being built where previously Palestinian villages had stood. The Israeli newspapers had reported the spread of Israeli houses into the Occupied Territories

but very little had been said about what had become of the people who had lived there before and their houses and adjacent orchards. *The Guardian* had more to say. There were reports about bulldozers and armed soldiers driving people from their homes. There were reports of arrests. Some of those detained were children. They were youngsters whose crime had been to throw a stone at an armoured troop carrier. When he had read all the copies of *The Guardian* he re-read old copies of *Ha'aretz*, this time more carefully.

For months Reuben was suspended in a mix of denial and confusion. Then came anger, not only at what he read, but at himself, for being so easily fooled. It felt familiar. He recalled how he had felt when he first learned that the South African Defence Force had penetrated deep into Angola, determined to wipe out the ANC and their military camps. There had been rumours of raids on ANC homes in neighbouring Botswana. It had all been categorically denied at the time, but Reuben had not been able to stop imagining people running for their lives, and being shot at by planes flying overhead. They must have been killed. How many, he had asked himself? Surely families had lived there, with kids, also Batswana civilians. An old rage returned when he realised that yet again he had been tricked and lied to. It left him feeling foolish. He also felt ashamed.

He found reports of the war in Lebanon. It had happened before he arrived, and had dragged on. How had he known nothing of all of this? There were losses on both sides. The Israeli Defence Force was determined to destroy the PLO camps in South Lebanon. The library was never locked at night and he would hurry from dinner back to the storeroom, desperate to read more, but dreading it at the same time.

Then he found reports about Shatilla and Sabra. The Israeli newspapers were vague. At first he didn't really understand, couldn't believe it. Palestinian refugees massacred, while Israelis stood by? As he read he knew something was happening to him. Everything he had always believed was now uncertain. The conviction he had grown up with was crumbling and nothing would be the same again.

Had all of this skirted the kibbutz? It wasn't that long ago. Three years ago, he calculated. He took to looking closely at his fellow kibbutzniks, peering at their faces to see if they knew and were simply pretending that they didn't.

Late one night Reuben read a report on the Kahan Commission. It was a long piece, and he kept losing his place. The Hebrew it was written in seemed impenetrable. There were reports of an official investigation. The UN itself declaring Israel responsible. The article used words like "massacre" and "genocide". He had to read it several time to make sense of what it was saying. Israeli military personnel had been aware that a massacre was in progress,

had failed to take serious steps to stop it. Ariel Sharon, then Defence Minister, was held personally responsible.

Back in his room that night Reuben tried to remember what had happened to Sharon. Was he charged? Did he resign? He couldn't recall what the article had said. Why couldn't he remember? He looked at his watch. It was after 3am. He seriously considered pulling on some clothes and heading back to the library. He needed to read the article again. But he stayed in his bed, his eyes open but seeing little in the dark.

That was the last time he went to the library. After that night he bought a small radio and rigged up a makeshift aerial out of a length of wire which he attached to the roof of his room. For hours at night he would fiddle with the dial. Newspapers sensationalised the news, he told himself.

The Hebrew channels were mostly music stations and light entertainment. He would listen to classical music or a quiz show for a while. Then he would become impatient and return to spinning the radio knob, first one way, then back again. The static seemed to be taunting him. It was hiding something that he needed to know. He searched for an English-language news channel. Sometimes by chance he would tune into the BBC. Israel was rarely mentioned and he felt relief.

One night though, an impeccable detached English voice described marching and chanting crowds in Tel Aviv. There was an official investigation, into what he wasn't sure. It was something about shootings in the Occupied Territories. He couldn't make it out. The broadcast was nearly over when he tuned in. He heard only that the Israeli military was involved, according to the reader. Then the news moved on to something else.

Reuben went about his daily duties, by then hardly talking to others at all, only listening to his fellow kibbutzniks as they talked. He felt as if he was eavesdropping but he kept hoping he would hear someone say something about what was really going on beyond the green fields and rolling hills that surrounded Kibbutz Ma'ayan Michael. He needed confirmation to give shape to his own feelings of unreality.

On one of the first hot days of that summer, on his way to the library before lunch, something made him take a detour past the school. The sounds of shrieking and laughter reached him from a distance. As he walked closer he could hear the kids at play more clearly. He wondered how long it had been since he had heard laughter. He couldn't recall. He guessed classes were over for the day, or perhaps the kids were taking their lunch break. He began following the same route each time, even though it made his walk to the library longer. He was rewarded when one day he spotted an open door. It was a distance away and through

the wire mesh fencing he could only make out figures and movement. He liked the bright colours he could see from where he stood and stopped to watch. There was an energy that somehow lifted him.

Metres away was a gate, its latch at adult height. It wasn't locked and after hesitating he opened it and went into the grounds, taking care to make sure the gate was firmly closed behind him. He made his way into the room and took up position just inside the open doorway. Nobody paid him any attention.

Now, instead of spending all his free time in the library, he would stop in at the children's section. He wasn't sure if he was allowed to, but no-one seemed to notice him. It became his practice to spend his lunch breaks watching the kids at play, looking out for Dov. When he couldn't spot him, Reuben always felt a tremor of panic. Not at the thought that Dov had somehow disappeared. What he dreaded most was that he would no longer recognise his son. He would not be able to pick him out in the crowd of tousled-headed kids in shorts and T-shirts. Had Dov become one of them? He wanted his son to be part of the laughing crowd at play, yelling and competing to make themselves heard above the random chaos of that playtime hour, but what would then become of Dov? Would he too in time take on the indifferent expressions he saw on the faces of the adults?

When he spotted Dov, he kept his eyes fixed on him. He didn't call to him but simply watched his son and marvelled at how easily he fitted in. Hebrew had displaced English almost overnight. Sometimes Dov spotted him and would race over for a quick hug and a hurried comment. But his Hebrew was too fast for Reuben and before he could make out what Dov was saying the boy had run back to join the game. After a while Reuben began to wonder if he was imagining it or if the hugs, the brief chats, were becoming shorter each time.

He preferred it when he could take Dov away for longer excursions or walks around the farm. That was permitted on weekends. They never said much, but Reuben treasured having Dov to himself. He enjoyed watching him scrambling over the fields, stopping to study something then running on. Sometimes he watched as the boy found an unusual stone, or perhaps an insect. He would become absorbed, studying it, sometimes carrying it carefully to show his father before replacing it exactly where he had found it.

For Reuben these were the only times he ever recognised in Dov signs of himself as a child. It reminded him of his days spent scrabbling in the veld. He had also been about seven or eight like Dov, maybe a bit older. It pleased him that his son also liked the outdoors. There

was something appealing about the quiet peace of the semi-desert which hid frenetic unseen activity beneath rocks, below the surface of the sand and in the bark of the shrub-like bushes.

Together Reuben and Dov explored. They said little as they hiked in the surrounding hillsides amid the dry scrub. As his son grew sturdier, more energetic and stronger from life on the farm, their walks became more strenuous and took them further afield. Reuben always felt a sinking regret when they had to turn back. He wanted to keep on walking, taking Dov with him. But where would he take him to?

Then came the day that Reuben decided to show Dov the ruin above the kibbutz. He had walked there before. It required a steep climb which was rocky in places, especially near the top. But he was pleased to watch how gracefully his child made his way across the rough terrain. At one point Dov stopped and looked back at Reuben, who was keeping up a slower but steady pace. Dov beamed with unbridled pleasure, and Reuben knew without anything needing to be said that they were sharing the same sense of elation and wonder. At the top, the silence engulfed them and neither said a word to displace it. On one side they could see the kibbutz far below them. Turning around there were only distant mountains and rolling sand. They stared as they shared sandwiches and oranges. The sweet smell of citrus as he peeled off quarters for Dov was sharp and clear. That was something he always remembered about that day.

Or did he remember it because it was then that everything changed?

Dov soon set off again, running ahead. And then he stopped. Reuben watched as he squatted, examining something he had found. Absorbed, he poured over it for a long while. Then Reuben knew, and he realised it was something that he had known since the first time he had come across this place. He watched, knowing he could not stop what he could see was happening. He realised he was holding his breath and released it with a sigh. If Dov had found out it could no longer be hidden.

Suddenly the boy was shouting to him but Reuben couldn't hear what he was saying. Or maybe he heard but couldn't make sense of it. Dov came flying back. He was excited and scrambled down the incline as fast as he could, stumbling and slipping. He didn't use his hands to steady himself because they were cupped carefully, cradling something. An injured bird? A lizard maybe. That's what Reuben was hoping. Dov loved snakes and lizards at that age.

But Dov had found something different. Reuben stared at him, frozen for a moment. His first thought was to turn round and run down the rocky slope, away from whatever it was that Dov had uncovered. But something forced himself up the incline, trying to reach his son

as fast as he could. Whatever Dov had found, Reuben knew he wanted to take it away from him and return it to wherever it been hidden all these years. With his outstretched hands Dov silently invited Reuben to take a look. What Dov was holding gently was a ceramic bowl, perfectly intact but dusty from the sand. Reuben could not look at his son's face.

"Dad, what is this? What's it doing here? It's old, isn't it?"

Dov was breathless from his run. Reuben had to say something, but what? He mumbled, mentioning biblical times, people from long gone. Dov looked down at the bowl as Reuben continued.

They both stood, staring at the dusty bowl. Dov then walked some way off and placed the bowl on a mound of rocks. Reuben wished he would race off as he always had done on these walks, but this time the boy walked thoughtfully by his side. They continued down the hill for a long while in silence.

"I wonder where the person is now. The person who owns that bowl," Dov said as they neared the kibbutz. "I bet that person is probably wondering where it's gone. Maybe they are looking for it, Dad?" Dov looked up at Reuben.

"We should have brought it back." Dov stopped for a moment, as if he was considering returning to fetch it.

"We could give it in at the lost property office." Dov stopped again. Reuben waited in silence. His breathing was shallow even though the walk back had been easy going.

Reuben knew then that he could no longer ignore the rubble and traces of the foundations of buildings. In places the remains of walls still stood, like motionless guards or silent witnesses. From that day Reuben knew that the peace he had found on the hilltop could not be recovered. He could never go back there. He could no longer ignore the lingering memories that still seemed to occupy the ruin. He had no right to disturb them.

He also knew he had to leave the kibbutz and take Dov away. No home could be built on a foundation of lies and denial. It was only days later that Reuben tugged a silently weeping eight-year-old to the taxi. Was that perhaps the start of it all, or perhaps the end of something that couldn't have lasted? Dov dragged a single bag in his free hand, leaving an untidy furrow in the dry sand behind him. In time a gaping crevice was to develop between them, but Reuben was not to know that then, or even for a long time afterwards.

They moved to Tel Aviv, into a small apartment where they shared a bedroom and ate their meals in silence, seated facing each other at the opposite ends of a rough wooden table.

5

Reuben always woke earlier than Dov. He would read *Ha'aretz* at the kitchen table. Apart from the rustle of the turning pages the silence in the apartment was intense. He could sometimes hear Dov's quiet breathing from beyond the open door that separated the bedroom from the kitchen. Reuben would stop to listen. The low hum Dov made as he released each breath was calming. It made Reuben realise that it was during those moments that he probably felt closest to his son.

The truth was that he hardly knew Dov. That this was no longer the baby he had bathed and fed and read to at night. Nor was there anything left of the boy from the children's section at the kibbutz. He heard no more chatter and saw no lively play with other kids. That boy, who used to love to hike with his father in the fields and mountains surrounding the kibbutz, had gone. All that he recognised was the Dov who had conducted his solemn daily ritual during his visits to his father's room. This was the Dov he now lived with, in the apartment in Tel Aviv. Reuben was left with an aching lack of intimacy.

Without discussing it, both settled into a routine that marked out their days with a regularity that persisted for years. Dov would dress for school as Reuben fixed his breakfast. Dov always remembered to wash his face. He never had to be told to brush his teeth. Reuben never knew if he had done his homework. He knew only that there was never a need to ask. It was rare that his son's bag would not have been packed the night before. The boy never forgot things or had to race back at the last moment. Instead he would be standing patiently at the front door moments before it was time to leave. Dov walked by his side down the stairs and along the three blocks to the bus stop. He matched his father's pace, and Reuben would think back to their walks on the kibbutz. Right from the start Dov had made it clear that he was now too old to leap down the stairs or race ahead of his father.

At first Reuben would recall how he had once watched Dov at play, back at the kibbutz. He wondered what Dov was like at school. Did that Dov ever emerge when he was not around? The person he saw now was nothing like that child, and as Dov grew taller, lankier, and even more silent, he became almost unrecognisable.

Reuben was left wondering if life on the kibbutz had instilled this order and discipline into his child, or if it was something else. Conversation was stilted and awkward. Reuben noticed that as he got older Dov seemed to avoid eye contact with him. He would watch his

son silently rearrange whatever happened to be lying on the kitchen table. The unfolded newspaper would be neatly refolded. Glasses of juice would be replaced alongside each plate. The older Dov liked to line up the salt and pepper pots in a particular spot where the large wooden table was marked by a slight groove. Reuben noticed the salt would always be placed on the right, pepper on the left.

Disturbing though he found it all, Reuben was at the same time grateful for the restraint and obsessive tidiness. It made their days uneventful. Reuben had found a job in the library of Tel Aviv University. It was a long commute each day, and he came home tired. But most of all he relished the quiet of the library, so it was with relief that he found Dov almost never disturbed that lingering silence.

Then suddenly it was gone, and it shattered with a swiftness that sent Reuben reeling. He never fully caught his balance again. The storm that broke was like those of his Highveld childhood, with all the violence of thunder and lightning and volleys of rain. Only those storms had always been brief, and left behind an air cleansed of the summer heat, steam gently rising from baking asphalt. This storm, once unleashed, never ended, or so it seemed at the time. Reuben wondered if they had been living for years suspended in that breath-holding moment when the day's mounting heat had held everything fixed in a kind of stupor waiting for the first lightening to rip open the sky.

It happened soon after Dov's bar mitzvah. Did Dov feel a need to behave differently now that that he was officially a man? They began to clash. Later this became an argument at every turn. At first it was over small things. Dov's refusal to eat breakfast or his declaration that he would no longer wear shoes or brush his hair. Each day renewed their war of attrition.

Reuben savoured his early morning moments alone, but now he closed the door to the bedroom before sitting down to his newspaper, cup of coffee in hand, sipping slowly as the steam rose, a warming coffee-scented breath.

Their arguments took on a growing intensity. This wasn't a normal adolescence. Inexperienced as he was, Reuben knew that much. Dov, already by then nearer to his father in height, took up too much space in their small apartment. Reuben sensed Dov stalking him. As he came through the door after work, keys in one hand, his battered briefcase in the other, Dov would be ready, on the prowl close behind him, waiting and looking for a fight. Reuben sometimes thought he felt the hairs on his neck prickle when Dov came close. Was that Dov's breath he thought he could feel on his neck?

The first suicide attack in Israel had happened in Afula, a town in the far north close to the Lebanese border. It was 1994. Dov was fifteen, and suddenly aware of what was going

on around him. Many argued that this was actually the second assault of its kind. Egged commuter bus No. 405, on its regular route from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, had plunged down a ravine when a Palestinian man, a Jihadist it was said, wrenched the steering wheel to one side. Many died but the attacker had survived, so could it really be called a suicide attack? Dov was ten at the time, and heard nothing of it, or if he did, he made no mention of it at all.

Over the years there had been attacks and assassinations and counter attacks. So many. Years followed years of it. Reuben had kept it all away from Dov. News of the Occupation, the shootings, the arrests, the laws that restricted Palestinians' movement, herded them into diminishing spaces that were overcrowded and more ghetto-like every day. The growing Palestinian resistance and the Intifada. For years none of that had found its way into their Tel Aviv apartment.

Reuben followed it in the news, but kept it to himself. It was all too familiar. The violence, the protests, the overwhelming power of the military. He remembered it all, even his own despair. He had taken his son away from it years before and was determined that he would keep him at a safe distance.

He failed of course, and then wondered what had made him think that he could protect Dov. He was a teenager by then, showing a definite moustache and stringy chin hair that he left to grow. The Afula blast happened far from their home but it blew their lives apart in ways that neither could have expected.

"Nothing will ever be the same again."

That's what people said at the time. It had been said many times before, only this time Reuben knew they were right. What he couldn't understand was how this distant explosion had managed to fling father and son so far apart that they landed in opposing camps with an impenetrable no-man's land separating them.

"Israel, it's my country, I will defend it, always."

Dov planted his feet firmly astride, and Reuben caught sight of the man he was going to become. It scared him. The bitter rage of his son rocked his own world in a way no bomb ever could have. He tried to explain to Dov, patiently at first, and then more urgently.

"The violence, it must stop. Israeli soldiers killing children. The prison sentences. For years, for life. For throwing a stone, saying the wrong thing, being in the wrong place." Reuben tried again and again. He knew he sounded pleading. But his words quickly vaporised in the heat of Dov's anger.

"I have seen this before." Reuben tried a different strategy. "Look at South Africa now. It's hard, but they could be starting something new. At least they are talking to each other, meeting face to face."

It was the early '90s, and what he read of the country that he had given up on all those years ago now showed moments of hope. There was violence, even the threat of civil war. But the generosity of those willing to forgive and find a way to reach the other almost moved him to tears. There were talks in Israel at the very same time, but the US-brokered peace negotiations, the return of Palestinian exiles and plans for self-rule did not touch him in anything like the same way. Maybe that was to do with Dov's reaction. When the news bulletins turned to the Oslo talks, Dov would leap to his feet, raging in turn at the newsreader and at Reuben. Together they watched Arafat's return on TV and his first address in Gaza. Dov kept up an unceasing rumble of commentary, his face bloated with rage. Reuben saw and heard nothing that was on the TV. His eyes remained fixed on his son. He had never seen Dov so convulsed. He could find nothing to say to the stranger Dov had become. His son was resolute, unbudging and unmoved.

Reuben's earlier irritation, even anger, was replaced by something far more painful. He felt a kind of desperation. He no longer raised his voice. He left Dov to do all the shouting. When Dov's rage filled the flat so that Reuben felt there was no air left for him to breath, he took to wandering off on long walks. He never went far. Maybe he didn't feel safe, or perhaps he didn't want to be far away should his son spin right off the precarious moral axis that Reuben felt was no longer fixed in place. For hours he circled the same few blocks. His mind raced although he walked slowly, his head bowed.

"It's happened to us Jews before. It will happen again," Dov would say repeatedly, his body rigid. Reuben noticed for the first time that his son had become muscular and was now a strong young man, ripped apart by hatred.

It was around this time that Reuben started going to the rallies and protests. Not often. But he had to know there were Israelis, Jews, who didn't hate. Peace Now always drew a crowd, and Reuben would make his way to their gatherings. Their focus was usually the illegal settlements and Reuben listened to the speeches in a mix of anger and disbelief. But mainly he studied the people, as they listened, clapped, and shouted slogans. He always took up a position at the edge, telling himself he didn't like crowds and that he didn't want to get caught up in a clash if things turned nasty. But he knew he really felt that there was no place for him there, even if he pushed his way in. He didn't know the songs they sang so lustily. He became familiar with the slogans but he was too self-conscious to shout out loud. He tried

concentrating on the speeches, but he was distracted. He silently wished that what he heard was untrue. Often, unable to listen to any more, he would wander away before the end of a rally, find himself a pavement cafe where he could order a coffee, sometimes a beer. He would ask himself why he had gone when he hadn't joined in and had left before the end.

The crowd left him feeling more alone than ever and he vowed not to go again. But he did. Something drew him back. It wasn't the slogans or the speeches, although he agreed with most of what he heard. It was the people. There was something about them. He would study the families, watching fathers carrying small children on their shoulders. He would scour the crowd, trying to see if there was anyone he knew. But when he did recognise a colleague or someone with whom he travelled on the bus each day he would turn away, hoping they hadn't seen him. No one ever approached or greeted him, which was somehow a relief.

He knew he was looking for something, but what? Maybe someone to share what he felt? Then one day it occurred to him that the person he was looking for was Dov. He laughed out loud at the thought. If Dov was here he would be on the other side of the police cordon. Reuben slipped down a side street and very soon could no longer hear anything more than a faint rumble from the sound system. He laughed again at his foolishness. Dov at a Peace Now rally? But he realised that his son was the only person he wanted to be with at these meetings. No one else would do. He was suddenly and unexpectedly close to tears.

The day came when there was nothing more to say to each other. It was not that they reached an agreement or even declared a truce. Perhaps everything that could be said had already been said. Few words now passed between them – "pass the milk, "close the window". Otherwise they occupied a silence so great it could not be bridged.

Reuben wondered what had suddenly ended their years of attrition. Was it seeing his son for the first time in his army uniform as he prepared to leave for his compulsory military service that made him realise that he had lost the battle? He never got used to seeing Dov dressed in his combat gear. Each time Dov returned to camp after breaks in his years of army service and later when he went on regular voluntary stints, Reuben could never look directly at him in his camouflage. His eyes always stayed fixed on the rifle pointing aggressively upwards from behind his son's right shoulder.

Dov's military service meant he was away a lot. But each return became more difficult until, after some years of this, he announced one morning that he was moving out. Leaving home. Reuben said nothing and didn't ask where he would be living. It wasn't that he didn't want to know. What he feared was that Dov would not answer and that he would be

forced to live with the knowledge that his son had refused to tell him where he would be setting up home.

The day that Dov moved out, Reuben went shopping. He spent most of the morning wandering slowly down aisles, studying the labels on items that he had no intention of buying. He pictured his son leaving and he imagined him slamming the door fiercely behind him. Eventually he had to go and see if Dov really had gone. He told himself he had to check if the door was still in one piece. He was surprised to find that the apartment looked exactly the same.

Dov had taken only his desk. Reuben stood for a long time marvelling at the amount of dust that had gathered beneath it over the years. He felt a familiar flash of irritation. Couldn't Dov have done a bit of sweeping before he left? But Reuben left the dust where it was, unable to face clearing away this small sign of the life that had been lived out here. He wondered if Dov had felt the same reluctance. He decided it was unlikely.

At first it was the little things that got to him. There were the items on the shopping list that Reuben no longer needed to buy. The soap that Dov used instead of shaving foam, and the brand of crackers that he liked and would crunch loudly, finishing off a packet in a single sitting. Then there was the waiting for him to come home at night. Reuben had not even been aware that he had been doing that until he realised that Dov would not be coming back that night or any other time. Reuben realised that Dov had favoured a certain aftershave and he thought the smell of it lingered, then he wondered if he was imagining it.

Sometimes he would visit each room in turn. He would leave what used to be Dov's bedroom for last. The furniture in the apartment, the pictures, the curtains were still in place. Nothing had changed, yet it felt unfamiliar. What surprised him most was that the bookshelf had remained untouched. It looked as if Dov had not taken any books with him. Reuben could not imagine walking away from a lifetime of the words, images, and stories that had shaped his thinking, from those earliest children's books that they had once read together. His bed had also been left behind. Reuben wondered where Dov slept at night and then forced himself to remember that it was no longer his concern.

There would be no more occasional sharing of a beer, sipping in silence, Dov in his usual place at the window staring at the street below. Although thinking back, Reuben realised that that had ended a long time ago without him realising it. Then he wondered if his son had been avoiding him, perhaps for some time. They had passed in the doorway, Reuben returning from work, Dov slipping by, his eyes averted, sometimes mumbling about going for a drink or meeting up with friends. Reuben began to wonder if he had waited until he heard

his father's footsteps at the door, grabbed his keys as he heard him turn the lock. The thought made him suck in his breath and hold it for a long while.

Maybe it was then that he decided he too had to move. He couldn't remember when he made up his mind. It was not as if he made a decision. He took a drive north to the coast. Why Haifa? Was he thinking of Cape Town when he nodded, chose the apartment that had a view of the sea. It was the first place he looked at. He was lucky. Haifa University had a vacancy at that time in its library. It was much smaller, but in other ways he could carry on as he had before.

6

He found himself in a world that he would have found welcoming, if he were willing to be welcomed. Haifa was different in some way. There was a gentle co-existence that Tel Aviv had never had, and it comforted him. His flat was quiet, but it was different from the silence he had once shared with his son. This was peaceful. But it was not home, and Reuben wondered if it ever would be.

The nights were the most difficult. He would wake and it would still be dark. He would be sweating. The sheet was sticky beneath him. He would struggle to fill his lungs. The air in his new flat in Haifa felt syrupy. He would stare into the thick dark until his eyes started to make out familiar outlines, the desk in the corner and the bookshelf above it. He grappled with something that felt like panic.

He already knew he was unlikely to fall asleep again soon. In all likelihood he would be awake until the first touch of dawn. Sitting upright, he swung both feet to the floor. The wooden planks felt comfortingly solid. Standing tentatively as if testing the ground beneath him, his breathing became more measured and he made his way to the open doors of the balcony. It wasn't a real balcony. It had a name – a Juliette balcony, Reuben recalled. Iron metal grilles that bulged outward and upwards before being gathered and fixed to a rail at waist height. The doors, usually open because of the heat, almost reached the ceiling. On those solitary nights Reuben liked to open the curtains and grasp the rail with both hands. The wind exhaled gently over him and the sweat on his T-shirt cooled, which helped him breathe more evenly.

These were the times he felt most alone. He would think of the other tenants in the apartment block, in their adjacent flats. He didn't know any of them and had never attempted more than a brief nod in greeting. But during those dark hours he liked to picture them in their different beds, sleeping probably, but not that far away. He would try to recall the man who lived in the flat below. They had never spoken, even when they passed in the stairwell. He had spectacles, dark-rimmed. Reuben had noticed he was always neatly turned out. That was unusual. In Israel most men wore open-necked shirts, shorts in summer. But Reuben could remember nothing of his face.

He starting slowing down each time he climbed down the stairs as he passed the door directly below his. It looked like all the others in the building, gave no clues about the man who lived there, which left Reuben feeling foolish. What had he expected?

It was a Saturday morning. Most of the shops were closed. Saturday had become the day he stayed at home, stepping out only once, early, to buy the weekend newspapers and an excellent coffee from the Palestinian who ran the newspaper stall on the street outside his flat.

Reuben enjoyed the weekly ritual. There was something comforting about the gentle rush of the coffee beans as they were being ground. The vendor always set the stopwatch on his wrist, and at the high-pitched chime he would immediately stop his grinding, then peer at the coffee for a long moment, deciding if it was ground to his liking. It always was a perfect blend. Reuben would watch as the water slowly heated, steam started to rise and then the smell emerged as the coffee rose through the funnel. It bothered Reuben slightly that it was then poured unceremoniously into a polystyrene cup and a plastic lid was firmly set in place. But the coffee vendor always nodded with satisfaction and handed it over with a flourish.

That Saturday, climbing back up the stairs, holding his cup gingerly as usual, trying not to burn his fingers, and with several newspapers under his arm, he noticed his downstairs neighbour's door was wide open. He slowed down, curious, and paused to peer inside. From the doorway all he could see was an intricately designed rug covering the entire entrance hall. It was too large for the space and one side curled up against the wall. Reuben stared. It was breath-taking. The border in purples and pinks framed an intricate display of fruit and flowers. The only other place Reuben had seen anything like it was in the Yasser Barakat Gallery in old Jerusalem. It had to be hand woven, he thought, and probably very old. He carefully placed his coffee on the passage floor, well out of the way. Kneeling in the doorway, he leaned forward and ran his right hand over the thick pile, tracing the detail with his forefinger.

"May I help you?" The voice was lightly accented.

Reuben stood up, embarrassed, yet kept his eyes fixed on the pattern at his feet. He was reluctant to look away. A slight cough disturbed his contemplation. A young man was looking at him, curious but with a quiet smile.

"It's exquisite, isn't it," he said. Both men stared down at the rug at their feet in silence, standing at opposite ends of its perfect symmetry.

"Oh, sorry," Reuben suddenly felt foolish. "Sorry," he repeated. "The door was open. I couldn't help..." His voice trailed off as he gestured at the rug.

The man nodded. “I know. Exquisite,” he repeated softly. Reuben watched as the man looked down again at the rug, his expression suddenly intent as if he was seeing its details for the first time.

“What am I thinking,” the man smiled suddenly and looked directly at Reuben. “Haroom,” he said extending a hand and stepping firmly forward. Reuben found himself reluctant to step on the work of art at his feet.

“Come in, come,” said Haroom, his hand still outstretched, grinning unexpectedly. “You can walk on it. It’s a rug.” He gave a brief nod. “Welcome.”

Reuben clasped the hand offered. Haroom was at least a head shorter than he. His baggy chinos and long-sleeved blue shirt covered a thin frame. Reuben was surprised at the strength of his handshake.

“I don’t believe we have ever met,” Haroom said, smiling broadly now.

Reuben tried to place the accent as he followed Haroom across the rug and into a living room-cum bedroom. Haroom’s apartment was identical to his own, with its single large room and a kitchenette and bathroom behind curtained-off alcoves on opposite ends. Reuben noticed Haroom had placed his bed in exactly the same position as his. In every other way the room was entirely different. Where Reuben had only the basics, this room was alive with colour. Lavish was the word that came to Reuben’s mind. Giant brilliantly coloured pouffes of different shapes and sizes were placed at random. There were no curtains at the tall windows, allowing streams of light to cross the room, intensifying the colours and adding a shine to what could be seen of the wooden floor. Another rug, this one without a border and strewn with delicate animal shapes and bold flowers, covered the opposite wall. Reuben stared at it. He realised his life was entirely empty of such beauty.

“Coffee?” Haroom was saying. Reuben was confused for a moment. Was Haroom reminding him of his own cup of coffee, still where he had left it outside the door? Without waiting for an answer Haroom headed to the archway that Reuben knew led to the kitchenette. Reuben decided his coffee had probably grown cold, and it turned bitter if left standing.

“Thanks, yes,” he said, but the sounds of cups clattering and water running could already be heard. Reuben turned a slow circle on the spot, taking in the patterns and many deep shades.

“Grab a seat,” Haroom appeared at the archway. “You’ve got quite a choice.” Reuben looked back at him and together they laughed.

“Try a few, you’ll find the right one,” Haroom called, now back in the kitchenette.

Reuben sat hesitantly onto a leather ottoman behind him. He was surprised to find himself sinking into its depths, an unfamiliar scent of cured hide rose about him. Slowly he allowed himself to succumb to its comfort, rolling his head backwards until it rested in a perfectly angled dip, the leather giving way and taking the shape of a softly cupped hand. Reuben stared at the ceiling. It was identical to his own but he realised he had never really looked at his before. His eyes closed inadvertently. When he opened them Haroom's face was looking down at him. He was holding out a plate.

"You know these? Malateet," he said. "That's what we call them. Try one."

Reuben bit into a sausage-shaped cookie, nodding in appreciation as he recognised the taste of anise seeds. He glanced briefly at his host, then watched as Haroom poured black coffee into tiny enamel cups. Reuben couldn't place him. He didn't seem Israeli. His accent was slightly different.

Haroom seemed to guess what he was thinking. "I am Palestinian," he announced as he passed him a cup of steaming coffee. "And an Israeli citizen," he added.

Embarrassed now at his own curiosity, Reuben stared into the cup. The coffee was served in the traditional Palestinian style, tiny helpings, the host continually topping up. Haroom seemed determined to clear up the matter of his origins. In something of a rush he ran through a quick introduction.

"Born and grew up in Ramallah, schooled in Jordan and Beirut, the university there. Then post grad in the US, a small town."

He stopped as abruptly as he had started. They sat in silence for long moments. Reuben had noticed that he had not mentioned his parents. Were they still in Ramallah?

"What did you study...in America?" he asked, watching as Haroom poured another thimbleful of coffee first into Reuben's cup, then into his own.

Haroom hesitated, lifted the cup to his lips taking a slow sip. "Oh, well I studied chemistry at the beginning. It was my first degree. But I found I didn't really care for it after all."

His accent, Reuben now noticed, suggested a spell in the US. "Went instead to California to study psychology." Haroom shook his head slightly, as if still surprised at his decision. He fixed his brown eyes on Reuben.

"Sounds like quite a leap, but in the end it really was not so different. Humans and atoms, bumping into each other. The result. Anomie." He gave a brief laugh.

Reuben said nothing. He was intrigued by this slight young man with a ready smile but a guarded expression. Reuben realised that he would never have taken him for a

Palestinian. He had assumed Haroom to be Jewish. Palestinians rarely lived in this part of the city, and his Hebrew, while slightly accented, was perfect. He realised Haroom was looking at him expectantly. Unsure what to say, Reuben explained he had never finished his degree, never managed to find what he was looking for at university.

"It was a long time ago," he said with a laugh, surprised at how easily he had told this unknown youngster something he had hardly spoken of before. He wondered how to describe himself.

"I work in a library now, at the university. Mostly putting books back where they belong." Reuben thought how dull his life sounded. But Haroom seemed interested.

"And your accent? Hebrew is not your first language, I am right?" he asked.

Reuben offered a brief history of his life in South Africa. He didn't know how much to say. At first he didn't want Haroom to know about those faded Zionist dreams, his time on the kibbutz. Then it all came spilling out. Reuben found himself trying to explain the passion he once had, or thought he had had. The Zionism, its grand schemes, lofty ideas.

"The kibbutz. It was meant to be a model for a new world."

Haroom snorted loudly. "You know that's all rubbish," he said abruptly. Then he laughed as if trying to offset his irritation.

"I know now," Reuben said. He was quiet for a long while, struggling to subdue a desire to defend himself, while knowing he couldn't.

"Did you really believe it all?" Haroom now sounded amused, but still slightly angry. "When did you realise?"

Reuben shook his head, swinging it slowly from side to side. What exactly did he find? He looked up in surprise as Haroom echoed his own thinking.

"So, what did you find? Was it there as you expected, your new world?" Haroom's tone still held a bitter edge.

Reuben answered without having to think. "No. I just found more of the same world, I suppose."

Then he paused. "No, I don't know," he stammered. "Maybe worse, I don't know. I realised I was back at the underbelly of the world." Haroom looked at him, waiting in silence to hear more.

Reuben was struggling now, flustered as he tried to explain. "Remember, I came from South Africa. It was bad there, pretty bad."

Haroom now looked interested. His anger seemed to have faded. "Did it shock you, offend you?" he asked.

Reuben didn't know if Haroom meant South Africa or Israel. He frowned, confused.

"Here, what you found on the kibbutz?" Haroom added helpfully. "Was it South Africa all over again?"

Reuben felt his stomach tighten. It felt strange to hear someone ask him a question that he had asked himself many times before. This time he was expected to answer it and he realised that he couldn't. He struggled to find the right reply. Exasperated at his own hesitation, his words came out garbled. This wasn't quite what he wanted to say. He was surprised at how difficult this was turning out to be.

"White, Jewish. I couldn't see it clearly. I can't see it the way you can," he looked appealingly at Haroom. He really wasn't making much sense.

"You realise you have to face it," he tried again.

Haroom nodded. At the same time Reuben shook his head.

"I was back again, struggling to face the same things. Shame, guilt, those things." He paused, then added, smiling self-deprecatingly. "Jews know how to do guilt. It's pretty big in my culture."

Haroom raised both eyebrows. "Guilt? You telling me Jews feel bad, sorry for all they've done, the devastation, the Nakba. The Catastrophe?"

"No," Reuben said, frustrated at his own inability to explain what he meant. "Well, yes, they do. Some do."

Haroom's face suddenly took on a lofty expression. He gave Reuben a look of disdain and disinterest. Or was he trying to show that he simply did not believe him. He turned his face away from Reuben and looked slowly across the room. Then he fixed his gaze on the open balcony door, as if he wished he was standing there, looking out at the beach and the endless sea.

Reuben knew his face was flushed. He was embarrassed. His words sounded empty. Still he continued.

"But we also lost something too, when we took it all from you."

Reuben stopped, surprised at his own words. He wasn't sure what he meant, and when Haroom turned now and looked directly at him, Reuben saw scepticism. He stared at Reuben briefly. Then he looked down, his head angled slightly away. He seemed to be thinking.

"We lost something," Reuben said again.

He shook his head, aware that he sounded slightly ridiculous. They had been talking for what couldn't have been more than ten minutes, but already the conversation had veered

out of control. Yet he couldn't stop. It felt important to him that he explain himself, even if he didn't quite know or understand what he was trying to say.

When he spoke again, his voice was soft. Not apologetic, it sounded shamed. "We left ourselves behind when we moved into your homes, your land. I mean our selves," he faltered. Haroom was looking at him again, still with some incredulity but also curiosity. Reuben didn't know how to explain what he was trying to say.

"Our souls." He paused, wondered if it was scorn that flitted across Haroom's face followed by a brief cynical smile. Reuben tried once more.

"We lost all that when we took all that you had." He stopped abruptly, realising that at last it had all become clear to him. He was breathing heavily. The sound seemed to fill the room.

Then he found he was talking again. He wasn't sure if he was addressing Haroom anymore or himself. "Like the way you live in South Africa. It's all wrong and you know it and you tell yourself that's not where you belong. So you look elsewhere and there's the kibbutz. It took me a while, but in the end it was the same all over again." Reuben looked at Haroom, his face flushed.

"So you leave again, you have to," he trailed off then, surprised at himself, at how much he had said. He realised it was a long time since he had spoken for so long. It was also the first time he had tried to explain what he felt, and he felt it was coming out all wrong. He wondered again who he was speaking to. Had he said too much, spoken too soon?

"So now we are both refugees," Haroom replied after a while.

Reuben was surprised but felt comforted. It seemed a generous comment, or was Haroom being ironic. He tried to look closely at the younger man's expression, but Haroom had turned back to the coffee.

"I'll get more," he said.

Lying back in the depth of the Ottoman, Reuben thought about what Haroom had just said. A refugee. He realised that the word somehow fitted. It was exactly how he felt, even though, unlike Haroom and his family, he had never been driven from his home. He looked up as Haroom returned, the dallah of coffee releasing a fresh strong aroma.

"A refugee? In my own country?"

Reuben's comment slipped out, taking both of them by surprise. Haroom replied curtly, also seemingly without thinking:

"Your country?"

There was silence. Both men realised that they had unwittingly hit a barrier. They had already come up against exactly what it was that would always keep them apart.

Then Haroom smiled again, disarming Reuben. The silence that followed was surprisingly not uncomfortable. The two men sat for a while with their own thoughts. They looked up at the same time and smiled at each other, but Reuben felt a sadness and he wondered if Haroom felt it too. Haroom shrugged. Reuben felt no need to reply, and placing his drained coffee cup on the floor he let his head roll back again comfortably. He could see Haroom reaching for the dallah.

Reuben indicated he wanted no more, and Haroom leaned back against a pouffe, this one a brightly coloured weave, staring up at the ceiling.

"Whose country?" he muttered. But there was no anger this time. If anything, Reuben thought he heard regret.

It was a question that embraced them both while at the same time came between them. Neither attempted an answer, leaving the question hovering, like a third presence in the room.

7

It had been an inauspicious start, but after that day Reuben took to pausing on the staircase outside Haroom's door almost every night as he climbed up to his own apartment after work. Although he could not recall ever having done anything like this before, he would knock softly, once, maybe twice a week.

Haroom was almost always there. He showed no surprise to see Reuben. Their visits were brief. A few coffees. Reuben discovered he liked the sharp, bitter taste. It was stronger than the coffee he was used to. Conversation was sparse, punctuated with protracted breaks, but there was no discomfort on either side. The two men, so different in their own worlds, seemed to inhabit a common domain of silence in which they were both equally at home. They made a curious pair, sharing something more than loneliness.

The conversation itself, especially at the beginning, didn't resume the intensity of that first confession. Reuben was relieved. So much had been said that day that neither felt the need to explain more. They chatted instead, mainly recounting incidents of the day. But as time went on, even through the silence, they each reached out carefully, a little further each time.

"Did you know?" Haroom once asked.

It came out of nowhere, and Reuben at first had no idea what Haroom was referring to. He looked up, watching Haroom's face as he visibly grappled with something. Reuben waited.

"Did you know what happened? Here? In '48, '67?" Haroom paused and looked at the floor. "Do you know what's going on right now?"

He seemed deeply uncomfortable. Reuben felt he should be the one to feel apologetic. Inexplicably he found he wanted to put Haroom at ease but he could find nothing comforting to say.

He shook his head, stopped and then nodded. "Yes," he said. "I do know. Or I know now, at least I think I do. I didn't know then, or maybe I did."

He stopped, confused. It was his turn to look at the floor. They both gazed at nothing, locked in silence.

Reuben spoke first. “I never believed people back in South Africa. The ones who said they didn’t know about the violence, the murders, the arrests, deaths in detention. First they tried to say it never happened. Now they like to say it’s time to forget and forgive.

“I still don’t believe them,” he mumbled, staring at the ground at his feet, unable somehow to look directly at Haroom. “

“And the Germans, of course.” Now he looked up and stared directly at Haroom. “They claimed they didn’t know. The death camps, the Final Solution.” For a moment Reuben felt a familiar outrage. His tone was sneering now. “Of course they knew. They had to know.”

“But you? You are going to tell me you didn’t know? About Palestine? What was happening here?” Haroom’s voice was challenging, loud in the quiet room.

That silenced Reuben. He glanced first at Haroom, then away and back again. He felt cornered. It made him angry, but his reply when it came was quiet, almost quizzical.

“I didn’t know.” Reuben sounded puzzled. Could Haroom believe him? When he spoke again, it was almost questioning. “I don’t know how it is possible, but I didn’t know any of it.”

There was silence for a long time, the only sound was the puff of the small flame under the coffee dallah.

“You know,” Reuben said suddenly, “I think I still don’t really know what’s going on. I mean I know now, the Nakba, the villages wiped out, people driven off. Like cattle. And the Occupied Territories, they are ghettoes. Of course, I know that. But I don’t *know* it. D’you understand?” Haroom was staring at him now, his face blank and hardened.

Reuben desperately wanted to make himself understood. He too wanted to understand. He tried again. “What do I believe? How could it have happened?”

“So what, you’re saying it didn’t?” There was challenge now in Haroom’s voice. “You, you’re telling me it didn’t...”

“No, no,” Reuben interrupted, his voice still low. When he looked up, Haroom’s expression was one of genuine interest. “I just don’t know...I mean. I know it’s true. But there’s always a question...no, listen to me.” Haroom was about to speak but Reuben felt he had to try to explain himself. He spoke again, this time more firmly. “I am trying to say, what...that I don’t know *how* it could have happened, is still happening.” He looked almost pleadingly at Haroom. “Do you know what I am saying? I didn’t know, then. I know now. But how such things could happen. That I will never know.”

"What's there to know? It's not so difficult," Haroom sounded like he was struggling to control his voice, holding back with an effort. "The Israelis came. They drove us away. Out of our homes. Homes our grandparents, great grandparents had built. If people tried to argue, or refused, they were shot. Women raped. They turned us out into the night. The houses that they left standing, they took them for themselves."

He lay back against a pouffe. Reuben stared at him. It was getting dark in the room. He watched as the pouffe slipped slowly under Haroom's weight leaving him lying almost flat on the floor, coming to a stop with only his head resting on the woven edge.

"We, I mean my parents, my grandparents. They slept in the fields. Among their own olive trees and fruit trees. For nights. But the Jews, the Israelis, they wanted them gone. Didn't want to even see them. They were forced to move. Leave their olive groves and go."

Haroom stopped and took a deep breath. "Do you know how old some of our olive trees were? Reuben? Do you know?" Haroom didn't wait for an answer.

"Hundreds of years old. Some of them." Haroom suddenly turned to look directly at Reuben. His voice was quite different. "What happened to those trees, do you know?" he asked, almost conversationally. "Chopped down, I expect. What do you think?"

Reuben didn't reply. He urgently wanted to explain something to Haroom, something that had to be made clear, but somehow it was beyond his reach. "I know. I mean I know, but didn't know then." It sounded hopelessly inadequate.

Haroom sat up suddenly, tugging the pouffe into place so he could rest his back. "So, when did you find out? I mean one day did some wise old bloke on the kibbutz take you aside, tell you 'hey, Reuben...this is all a lie'. Share it with you, the real story."

Haroom was no longer angry. He sounded genuinely curious. "Did you then decide it was the same as South Africa, just too awful?"

"Something like that," Reuben replied. "Well, I mean no one told me. It was there to see, the truth." He was surprised. In the end it was so obvious and it was Haroom who had helped him state it with simple clarity.

He found himself thinking back. "I mean South Africa, it was bad at that time. Ugly. Detentions. Protests. Troops in the townships. How much do you want to know? It was war, really."

"And when you got here," Haroom asked quietly, "was there no war?" Once again his voice was twisted in anger and he stopped. When he spoke again he sounded different, almost gentle. "Did you find peace?"

"You know, yes, I did. For a while." Reuben had to think hard. "I only stayed there for about a year, on the kibbutz. The hard labour, early to bed, too tired to think. It was a kind of peace, or something like that". He wasn't sure if peace was the right word. He knew only that it was something he had never known before.

Once again Haroon said exactly was he was thinking. "That was not peace." He articulated each word, speaking loudly. "If they told you that, they were lying. Or you were lying to yourself."

"Both," Reuben replied, coming to a sudden understanding. "I believed them, I decided to, for a while. And convinced myself."

A thought suddenly emerged and it felt important that Haroom understand it. "Yes, I did find peace. Just for a while. My own peace. I didn't want to see further than I had to. I had escaped something..."

Haroom looked at him quizzically. Reuben tried to explain. "I don't mean apartheid. I didn't have to run with the security police snapping at my heels. Nothing like that."

He struggled to explain. "I escaped...myself. That was it. My life, perhaps. But mostly myself. The kibbutz...yes, I can imagine what you're thinking...but I didn't see all that at first. I didn't want to know what it, we, had done, were doing. To me it was a place I could lay down. I believed it was a place where people shifted to make space for me."

"I am sorry Haroom," he said after a pause. "I am sorry."

"What, you apologising now?" Haroom sounded mildly irritated and amused at the same time.

Reuben took some to think over his reply. "Yes, I am sorry," he repeated slowly.

By now the room was dark. Even the small flame beneath the coffee pot had gone out. A long silence followed. But the tension had vanished with the last of the light, or so it seemed to Reuben.

But sitting in the dark made him feel alone. He could only see the outline of Haroom beside him, and even that was blurred. Suddenly he wanted to explain everything. "There was a ruin. Above the kibbutz". He could sense Haroom listening in the dark.

"I walked up there a lot. Hiked really, it was steep in places. Rocky. Especially as you reached the top. But a good walk. And beautiful. From up there you could see the kibbutz below and when you turned your back and looked the other way there was nothing. Just rolling mountains in the distance, and nothing else. I went up there wherever I could. At first I refused to see what I was looking at."

Reuben was talking softly and Haroom leaned closer to hear him. Reuben was silent for a long pause.

"There was nothing there really, just blocks of rubble. But after a while I had to see. When you looked closely you could make out that they were the remains of walls. I mean, there was no fooling myself. There was once a village. You could still see some foundations. After that I couldn't go back."

Haroom said nothing after Reuben finished. They each drank a thimbleful of coffee in a familiar silence but this time Reuben felt a difference. He felt relief, but could not tell how his story had affected Haroom.

He also felt awkward, and wished he could see Haroom's expression. The silence was unnerving him. He stood up suddenly, made for the door, stumbling over cushions in the dark as he mumbled goodbye.

As Reuben opened the door Haroom surprised him. "As-Salaam-Alaikum," he said in a strong voice.

Reuben paused. With his back to the room, he softly replied. "Wa-Alaikum-Salaam."

8

Their evening visits continued, taking on a comforting regularity. Reuben no longer hesitated before knocking at Haroom's door. Nevertheless, many things remained unsaid. Reuben knew Haroom wanted to ask him more. He too had his own questions, although he didn't how to put them. There was so much he needed to know.

Reuben startled himself when he finally came out with it and at that moment he realised that he had been waiting to ask this for a long time.

"So, tell me," he asked in a casual voice which immediately sounded unfamiliar to him. "What was it like? The West Bank? The Intifada? You were there, right?"

He couldn't remember when, but he recalled Haroom had mentioned something about this, almost in passing. There was an incident but Reuben was not given any details. Without realising it, this had been bothering him ever since.

Haroom was half dozing, his eyes closed. He opened them slowly but did not look at Reuben. "It was the end, over by then, by the time I arrived. I didn't see anything, no real action. Anyway, I was just a kid. Twelve years old." He shut his eyes again firmly.

Reuben sat up and stared across at Haroom. He was silent for a long moment. "Tell me," he said again.

This time Haroom turned to look at Reuben. He shook his head, laughed abruptly and closed his eyes.

"Tell me. Please," Reuben could barely recognise his own voice.

This time Haroom sat up. He swung around to face Reuben, crossed his legs and stared hard. "You don't want to hear this, trust me."

"Tell me anyway." Reuben could hear he was almost pleading.

"Reuben, you're a Jew, right? An Israeli."

Haroom sounded weary, but Reuben shot back promptly, "No. I'm not an Israeli citizen....never took out citizenship."

Immediately he realised the untruth of what he had just said.

Haroom latched onto it immediately. "Yes, well you didn't need to, did you? You got your citizenship anyway. Automatically. You're Jewish, therefore Israeli. It's your right, your birthright, wherever you come from. While we...well, for us its permits, curfews, begging for

permission to be in our own country, drive along our own roads, visit our relatives..." Haroom stopped suddenly. "But you know all this," he said.

Reuben said nothing. He stared at the wall hanging, marvelling at its intricate beauty.

"Reuben, what's this all about?" Haroom sounded angry now, his dark eyes hooded, fixed on a point on the wall above Reuben's head. "This stuff you are asking to hear about, it's going to hurt you."

They were silent for a while. The tension mounted. Reuben tried again. "In my country we had this, like, hearing. A commission to hear the truth. After apartheid."

"The Truth Commission, I've heard of it." Haroom sounded impatient.

"Truth and Reconciliation." Reuben replied. "Its full name was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Like those things are meant to go together. After the truth comes reconciliation." He paused. "I liked the idea of that," he added, but now it sounded absurd.

"And did it work, your Truth and Reconciliation Commission?" Haroom sounded strange, almost sneering, but a flicker of hope crossed his face. He waited for a reply.

"Well, no, I suspect not. Not really," Reuben replied, feeling guilty somehow, as if he had let Haroom down. "I don't think it did, in the end." He paused. He wanted to offer Haroom something more, but could think of nothing else to say.

"When the truth came out we knew there was too much damage, I suppose. So much broken that nothing could fix it." He spoke quietly.

"Not even truth, huh?" Haroom's sneering tone was back.

Reuben looked at him sadly. "No, not even truth," he agreed softly.

"So why do you want to know?" Haroom spoke after a brief silence. Reuben looked up in surprise. "Why do you want me to tell you about the Intifada? What do you want, what do you think, that's it's going to help you somehow, absolve you?"

Reuben was taken aback by Haroom's sudden aggression. "No. Nothing like that. Just the truth. The truth. I need to know," he added, leaning forward.

"It will hurt, you know. Truth hurts, remember," Haroom countered. He repeated himself. "Truth hurts."

"Yes, but, at least share the truth. That way we...I don't know," Reuben stopped abruptly. "At least let me share the pain," he blurted out.

Haroom looked at him, clearly angry now. "Really? You really think you can share the pain? Forget it, my friend," he sneered. "You have taken so much from us already. You don't get any more. You don't, you won't ever know that pain. It's ours. That's one thing you can never have. And as for reconciliation." He gave a bitter laugh.

Reuben was startled. Haroom had never spoken to him like that before. He realised Haroom had always treated him gently. Despite his youth, Haroom had been protective. Never before had he openly expressed this much anger. Reuben felt foolish. Haroom had a wisdom that only grows after generations of pain and he, Reuben, felt a kind of shame, an embarrassment almost, at his naivety.

"Tell me anyway," he whispered.

Haroom stared hard at him for what seemed like a long while. At last he spoke. "You ready for this?"

Reuben nodded.

"Where do I begin? I mean, the Intifada. I don't know that much," Haroom looked around the room. "But then I know all I have to know." He paused again, thoughtfully. "How do you grab hold of the truth when it is everywhere, all around you? Can you hand it over to another, somehow share it?"

Reuben shook his head, then after a pause he nodded. "Go on," he said patiently. He felt a kind of dread, like someone waiting to hear bad news, not wanting to know, but knowing he had to anyway.

"I was a kid," Haroom started. He paused, shook his head. "I knew this guy, Khaled. He said I should come to his place. In the West Bank. Balata. You heard of it?" He looked over at Reuben who shook his head.

"So I did go, one night. He was shocked when I knocked at his door. He didn't expect me to come I suppose. And he kind of hauled me inside before I could even say hello. He was pretty freaked out, looking down the road. Running to the window, checking to see if anyone had seen me."

Haroom shook his head. "Turns out there was a curfew. I didn't know. I could have been arrested. An Israeli soldier could have taken a pot shot. I was just damn lucky."

He had arrived at a bad time. That was clear. Haroom described a room full of people. He couldn't see how many in the dark. They were silent except for the crying, that did not let up. It was soft but like a song sung in rounds. People picked up the hushed wailing as it passed around the room. As one voice dropped off, another woman's voice would pick up the fading cry, with a wail repressed by a chorus from the shadows. They feared there were still troops outside.

"His brother had just died, earlier that day."

Khaled had pulled Haroom to one side. He told the story briefly. They had heard the sounds of bulldozers, then crashing glass. Khaled and his brother had gone out onto the small

roof above their house to see what was going on. Soldiers were standing by, with rifles, as a bulldozer levelled the house across the road. Then a couple of cars sped up. Settlers with guns were hanging out of the windows, shooting wildly, Khaled had said. He had run inside, then stopped in the doorway and turned back. His brother was lying on the ground, face down, blood spreading across the concrete. Khaled and his cousin dragged him inside, rolled him over. A bullet, maybe two, right in the chest. But he was alive.

"They could hear these settlers shouting in Hebrew. Rude words. Calling them dogs. Much worse things. They were too scared to leave the house. His mother, she just lay down on the floor. On her back. Not hurt or anything. She just lay there, didn't move. She didn't speak. One cousin had a car but each time they opened the door, to carry the brother out, drive him to a hospital, the shooting started again. They just had to sit inside, crouched against the wall beside the closed door. Bullets, two of them, ripped right through it. They watched his brother die."

9

Haroom was looking closely at Reuben as he spoke.

"The army?" Reuben asked. "Those soldiers. They did nothing? Where did these settlers come from?"

"The soldiers don't listen. The family had complained before. You know, you must know. This is how it is all the time. The soldiers tell them they must take their complaints to the headquarters. Can you believe it – the headquarters of the Palestinian Authority, where the settlers live. Imagine that."

Haroom was silent for a while. "All these people in the house...the stories they told. They couldn't stop talking, in whispers in case of army patrols outside. They had to keep repeating them to each other as if they couldn't believe what was happening.

"One girl said her brother was standing in the street and a soldier shot him. For no reason. It wasn't even curfew. And this old women said the soldiers came to her house, demanded she open the door and started beating up her grandson. She begged them to stop. They pushed her away. Actually shoved this old lady so that she fell on the floor. They claimed they had evidence that her grandson had thrown stones at the settlers.

"And the soldiers would literally call them out of their houses, tell them they had five minutes to clear out. They would try to drag out what furniture they could save. Then came the bulldozers and they'd watch as their homes were flattened."

"Why?" Reuben asked, as if talking to himself.

But Haroom answered anyway. "Don't ask why. There is no answer. Why do they do these things?" He stood up abruptly, strode to the open balcony door and gripped the rails. "Don't ask why." He spoke with his back to Reuben.

"Ask how?" Haroom said. "How can people do this? Do this to other people? And for how long? And again how? How can we stop them?" He stared at the street below before turning to face Reuben, leaning back against the rails.

"I told my parents this, all these stories. Long afterwards. I don't know what I wanted from them. Anger, at least. You know, some outrage. But they sat side by side on the sofa and neither of them would look at me."

Haroom sat down heavily on the nearest pouffe. "They were listening, I know that. I could see my father's face from where I was sitting. There were shadows moving across it.

Fear mostly, and a kind of horror. My mother was staring down at the floor. I couldn't see her expression. I don't know what she was thinking.

"I guess that's when they probably decided, and started all these plans to get me out of the country, applying for study permits. All that sort of thing takes ages.

"For a long time afterwards I was so angry. When they told me - it was about a year later - I couldn't even speak. I couldn't say no. I don't even remember saying goodbye to them at the airport. Just this anger bursting in me the whole flight to US.

"I was scared I would explode. I had to force myself to stay seated. I wanted to race up and down the aisle, jump out the plane, anything." After a moment he sighed, then looked up at Reuben.

"They were worried. I get that now. I mean, I knew that even then."

Unexpectedly he smiled. "You're a dad, right?" Reuben nodded, and waited to hear what Haroom would say next.

"Wouldn't you worry, about your son? He's what, my age, just about? Kids do crazy things...."

Something went cold inside him. Reuben stared at Haroom. "Yes, I worry. I worry all the time about my son. He's in the army. I think is he going to get killed. That's what I wake up with, last thought before I fall asleep. But, Haroom, I worry, what if, if he has become one of them? Those soldiers? Could my boy do that? Beat children and old women? Destroy a house? What if it's him at the steering wheel of that bulldozer?"

Reuben and Haroom stared at each other for a long while. Reuben broke the silence. "Are you still angry with your parents? Can you forgive them?"

Reuben realised as he spoke that this was the question he wanted to ask Dov. He sat thoughtfully for a moment, then tried again. "I mean, why are you angry with your parents?" Reuben was struggling to make himself understood. It was clear that he wasn't sure even he knew what he was asking. "I mean, they loved you. Love you. They were protecting you." He paused again.

With a laugh he added. "Parents do that, you know. Annoying as it may be. I guess it's instinctive." He lay back, suddenly tired. Haroom was staring at him expectantly and a bit puzzled.

"What is it you are asking?" Haroom asked after a long pause. "Of course I forgive them. They're my parents. What else can I do?" he shrugged. "And yes, I am still angry with them. Very angry."

Now Haroom was struggling. What he said next came out as a stammer. Reuben could hardly make it out.

"I am angry with them for what they are, for who they are. Or rather who they have become, allowed themselves to become."

Haroom swallowed. Reuben watched his Adam's apple. It moved slowly up and down as Haroom swallowed a few more times.

"But how can I? I have no right. I should be angry with the Israelis who made them into what they have become. With you." He looked defiantly for a moment at Reuben, then looked away.

"It's not their fault, my parents. Not their fault that they lost everything." He turned back to Reuben. His face was grey with pain. Reuben sat up, reached out a hand and then withdrew it.

"It's not right!" Haroom was animated suddenly.

This time Reuben reached out and laid a hand on Haroom's forearm. The dark hair felt soft. It was thick. It made him think of Dov.

Haroom hesitated, then moved his arm away. After a moment he patted Reuben's hand lying on the floor beside him. His touch was curiously conciliatory, while he spat out what he had to say.

"It's a fucking brutal occupation. They shoot people. You know that?"

Reuben nodded again, wrestling with a mix of shame and some kind of urge to defend himself. He was feeling under attack although he knew that he wasn't. Haroom wasn't shouting at him. He had to remind himself of that. He tried to say something, but all he could think of seemed puny in the face of so great an anger. He stopped. He could only listen. But Haroom was silent now. Reuben waited, but Haroom stared ahead in silence.

Eventually Reuben spoke. "Nothing I can say will change anything, or even mean anything."

It sounded pitiful, even to him. Haroom cast a quick look at him. In it Reuben saw something he couldn't identify at first. It was a kind of pity amid the anger. Yes, it was definitely pity that Haroom felt for him at this moment. It made him suddenly furious. With Haroom? With himself? He couldn't be sure.

"You are suffering, I know. Blame me, yes. You must hate me," he shot back at Haroom. "But why do you pity me? Why?" Now Haroom looked confused. Reuben couldn't stop. "In your face, what I see is pity. You look at me as if I am the victim."

Then he wished he hadn't spoken. His words shamed him. He, the victim? After all that had happened, was still happening, must the Jews claim to be history's only and ultimate victim? It is the Palestinians who have lost their homeland.

Haroom interrupted his thoughts. "I do feel some kind of pity for you." Haroom looked surprised at his own words, then laughed bitterly. "Fuck knows why. I should hate you. And I do. Not you, but all of you. I hate you. I do. I'll never stop, but..." he paused. Then looked again at Reuben with the same puzzled, questioning look.

"How do you live with yourselves? Really? You Israelis. You strut around. So fucking arrogant. With your camouflage, helmets, big rifles. Rude, talking to our parents as if they are nothing. Thinking you can ask us anything. 'Where you going?' 'Why?' 'What for?' You poke rifles about, in our bellies, point them at us.

"Have you seen a road block?" Reuben shook his head in silence.

"You would be ashamed. You should be." Haroom quietened suddenly.

"Yes, I do pity you. How do you live with yourselves? With your shame?"

Reuben was silent. All he could think of was Dov. He imagined his son accosting someone, for, what? Driving down a road? To work or home again? Was Dov one of them? Yes, he did feel it, a real shame. And an endless sadness.

"Tell me about your parents," he asked instead.

"You know their story," Haroom replied. "It's an old story. You must have heard it before. Many times, if you stopped to listen."

Reuben knew what Haroom would tell him, and wondered if he had ever listened, really listened.

He spoke before Haroom could reply. "Could I meet them? Your parents, one day?"

Reuben stopped, now embarrassed. He felt he had no right to ask this of Haroom. It felt like a request too big to be said out loud. He looked at Haroom, and realised he felt the same way. He looked reluctant. Doubtful.

"They live in Ramallah. In the West Bank." He paused, looked at Reuben. "Have you been to the West Bank? Maybe? Israelis like to visit. They like to say that they have seen the Occupied Territories. 'I have Palestinian friends. I visit them in the West Bank'." He mimicked an Israeli accent.

Reuben had to laugh, but he blushed at the same time.

"Gaza, that's what you want to see. Or rather what you really don't want to see."

Haroom continued. He was talking normally now, but seemed to be restraining himself, holding tight onto his anger.

"I can take you to see Ramallah. The house I grew up in," he said in the same tight voice, still sounding doubtful.

"Used to be my great grandfather's holiday home. In the rolling hills of Ramallah. Where they went for the summer break, to get away from the heat in Jaffa." Haroom turned now to face Reuben. He leaned forward.

"Yes, once they had a house in Jaffa. A beautiful home. With citrus trees in the garden. And an olive tree that was hundreds of years old." He paused, and seemed to be thinking. "That's what they always told me. I don't know if it really was hundreds of years old. Probably not. But that's what they said.

"Jaffa. They would walk down its busy streets in the warm evenings, and stop to chat to friends and neighbours. They walked with pride, like any person who has a home. Who lives in a place that belongs to them, and that they belong to.

"They didn't believe it, when they were told to go. They thought it must be some kind of mistake. It would all be cleared up. They'd be gone for a short while. They left their things. Didn't say goodbye. They were sure they would be back. Soon.

"Sometimes I still think they believe that, my grandparents. They still talk like that, like they are away for a while, a vacation. That they will return to their home in Jaffa overlooking the sea.

"It's been someone else's home for nearly 60 years. I don't think they have even seen it in all that time. Maybe they couldn't bear to see it now, now that it's someone else's home. Maybe it's been changed. Renovated. Maybe it's a nice modern Israeli house. The olive tree was probably chopped down years ago. Or maybe it's still standing, for someone else's kids, grandkids, to climb.

"They won't go and see. They don't want to know. Anyway, they can't. How would they get there? The road, the one for Arabs, I don't know what's left of it. They can't use the settlers' road. Jews only. And they would need permits..."

Haroom stopped suddenly. He sat in the same position, almost frozen, and silent now. Reuben waited, but Haroom said no more.

"May I go with you to Ramallah, one day, when you visit your parents?" Reuben asked again, uncertainly. Haroom did not reply.

Reuben got up to leave and Haroom spoke out suddenly. His voice was loud.

"Ask your son to take you. He has probably been to Ramallah many times."

Haroom's words cut into him. Reuben didn't answer. He straightened up slowly. All he could think of at that moment was how much more difficult it was for him these days to get up from the floor.

Maybe Haroom regretted his words. Remaining seated he continued. "It's quite a nice house. Where I grew up in Ramallah. I'll take you, one day. My father is a lawyer, always has been. It feels like he has spent his whole life trying.

"So many cases. You get that, living under the Occupation. He has spent hours, countless hours in court, to defend yet another kid who has been arrested. Who is facing treason, or at least a long sentence, maybe life. For throwing a stone." Haroom shrugged.

"Most Arab lawyers gave up. Some carried on. My father was one of those who carried on. He speaks perfect Hebrew. He tries again and again. He has done so for as long as I can remember. He has never stopped talking about human rights.

"His faith, that humankind could come right. That got to me, you know?" He looked up at the standing Reuben.

"I mean of course I respect my parents. I will. I must. But can I be angry with them at the same time? I am, you know. Angry. And why?" Haroom ran his fingers through his hair in a gesture that Reuben had never seen before.

"I am angry with them because they think there will be human rights and we are going back to my great-grandparent's house in Jaffa one day. Well maybe they don't really believe that. But they talk as if they do."

It was the first time Haroom had talked about his childhood spent living under the Occupation. "My grandparents always believed they could see the lights of their old homes in Jaffa from the hills of Ramallah. What could they remember of Jaffa?

"They wanted to believe they could look down on what was once their home. They even convinced my parents," Haroom said with a snort. "One day I worked out that they had it wrong, all that time. It was Haifa they were seeing. The lights of Haifa at night. I have never told that to anyone".

While Reuben stood still and silent, Haroom continued to tell stories he'd grown up with. His grandparents' Jaffa childhood. His father's descriptions of the hills surrounding Ramallah when he was a boy, before the settlers came and levelled the ground. How villages of pre-built houses were erected, sometimes in a day or two.

"My parents said the Jews' houses were ugly. They all looked alike. Land that had been tended by generations of Palestinian families were seized, levelled, our olive and citrus

groves uprooted. To make way for a different way of farming. With irrigation and huge fields.

"My father told me one day he and my grandfather came home to find one of the hills had been decapitated. That's the word they used. I know because I had to look it up. I didn't want to ask. I remember that still. 'Chopping off of the head.' That's was what the dictionary said, something like that. That was the word my father used.

"It was there, their hilltop, when they left in the morning, and when they came home it was gone. In its place were settlers, a whole village of them. Probably one of the first settlements."

Then Haroom stopped. He swung to his feet, and placed a hand on each of Reuben's shoulders. It was something Dov used to do, a long time ago. Reuben remembered it clearly, that gesture, their faces so close, while between them lay a vast distance, a world of anger. Reuben's breathing became shallow. He felt light-headed and rocked forward, stumbling.

"You okay?" Haroom asked, his voice now quite steady.

Reuben nodded. He looked directly into Haroom's eyes. What he saw there was an unexpected kindness and again that pity. It made Reuben uncomfortable and confused. It was he who should feel pity and shame.

Haroom surprised him with his next words.

"Your son," he said quietly. "He knows you worry about him. And he will remember that when he needs to. Like in the middle of a gun battle, when he is closed inside his tank, shooting all over the place. It will be his father who he thinks of. His father who worries about him. That's what will be uppermost in his mind."

Reuben said nothing to that. He had no idea what to say.

10

Haroom was right and wrong, as it turned out, but Reuben was to learn that only later. So long had already passed without a word from Dov. The call, when it did come, one morning as Reuben was brooding over his second cup of coffee and staring out to sea, was as jarring as one of those that shatter the dark hours and shake you awake.

It was rare for him to receive a phone call. First he felt panic. Had something happened to Dov? That was his first thought. Then came wild hope, that it was Dov calling. And then a different kind of fear. If it was Dov, why would he be calling? His coffee stayed halfway to his mouth as he listened to the insistent ringing.

It was not Dov. It was a woman. She did not give her name. Reuben was distracted, trying to place her accent. She sounded American, but as if she had been living in the Middle East for a long time. She spoke perfect English, albeit with an awkward twang.

The call was brief. After he put the phone down Reuben realised he had not said a word and he could hardly remember the conversation. The only part he recalled was something like "you must come. Your son needs you." It was all that he heard. That, and an address, which sounded like somewhere in the Sinai. A place he had never heard of. Dahab.

The woman had sounded like she was in a hurry. "Salaam," she said abruptly and the line went dead.

Reuben had scribbled down the address, even while his mind was reeling. Who had given her his number? Did someone ask her to call? Had it been Dov? For several minutes he did nothing. Then he began to get ready like any other day, until it occurred to him that he would not be going to work. He put down his shaving brush. Suddenly close to panic, he raced to his desk, switched on the computer before even sitting down. Booting up took slow minutes. He typed Dahab, thumped enter. It came up immediately, along with its Israeli name. Di-Zahav. Reuben remembered then that he had heard of it. A seaside resort, famous for its snorkelling. Not as popular as it used to be. Some countries listed travel warnings. He pulled the chair closer and kneeled on it, one foot still on the ground, as if ready to race off if he had to.

The first sites that came up were for tourists, offering similar hotels all at reduced prices, with pictures of sweeping beaches and seafront restaurants. Impatiently Reuben typed

the address into the search bar. The website that came up showed a run-down establishment. Maybe once it had been an hotel but it looked more like a home in a Bedouin village.

Adverts kept popping up, showing beaches and smart hotels. Reuben shut them down impatiently. He wanted to get going but couldn't tear himself away from the image on the screen, as if looking at its ramshackle thatch roof and rough walls could somehow tell him what Dov was doing there. How he had landed up in what looked like the back end of a seaside town that had seen better days. Yes, he had heard of Di-Zahav. Years ago it had been a place for backpackers and hippies.

That was where his son was waiting, the woman had said. He was waiting for Reuben. Or maybe the nameless woman had got it all wrong. Why would Dov be in Sinai? He paused, took a deep breath, then without logging off, still staring at the screen, he emailed a message to the chief librarian.

"Won't be in today," he typed, adding "something has come up". Then he deleted "today" and briefly thought about adding a sentence about a family emergency, but he realised he couldn't bear the sound of that. Was it a family emergency? He pressed send. Then he flew about his apartment, grabbing not quite dry clothes off the clothesline in the bathroom, a toothbrush, and a towel. He realised that he hadn't brushed his teeth that morning, and stopped what he was doing. Taking time for a thorough brushing he stared at himself in the mirror above the sink. He looked scared. Was he expecting the worst?

"Calm down," he said out loud, repeating it a few times. He contemplated shaving, decided there was no time for that, but washed his face with care, and made an effort with a comb before tossing it into the bag. He returned to the computer and looked up the border crossing. Passenger cars weren't being allowed through, or if they were, there was something about needing a change of number plates. He logged onto the Egged bus timetable. It took some time for him to make out the route. He had to head first to Eilat, then get to the border. After that there would be a taxi, maybe a bus. It wasn't clear. He would have to see when he got there. Running a finger down the monitor, adding rapidly in his head, he worked out that it would take at least seven hours, maybe more if he missed connections or there were delays. He sat back in his chair and thought for a moment about making a fresh cup of coffee. Then he checked the departure time of the next bus before shutting down.

If he drove to the station, left his car there, he might make the 8.35am. At the door he remembered he would need a passport. Something made him hunt down his old South African passport. How had Dov crossed into Egypt with an Israeli passport he wondered briefly, then reminded himself that the Red Sea resorts were popular with day visitors. At the

door, he turned back again to throw some hiking gear into his bag. Something made him remember his hikes with Dov as a boy.

The second call came when he was already outside. He heard the ringing and dashed back, grabbing the receiver, his heavy backpack pulling uncomfortably on one shoulder.

"Dad?" The voice was not familiar. Reuben caught himself wondering if it really was Dov. Was Dov calling him? He heard the strange voice again. "Dad?" It sounded strangled. Or was it a bad line?

"Dov, Dov is that you?" Reuben dropped his pack at his feet. He felt a strong need to sit, wished he had a chair nearby, then sat abruptly on the floor. "Dov, are you safe?"

The reply sounded a lot more like the Dov he remembered. Even the tone of slight impatience. "Yes, yes. I'm fine. Of course I'm safe."

Reuben felt himself slump in relief, his face now close to his knees. Could he get up again, he wondered? Then Dov was talking.

"Are you coming, Dad?" Again the unfamiliar voice. This was a Dov he did not know. A Dov in need.

"Yes, yes. Of course. I've googled it. Just about to leave." Reuben realised he was talking fast. He tried again. "Where are you? I mean what the hell are you doing in Sinai?"

Dov didn't reply. Reuben remembered how Dov would ignore questions that he didn't want to answer. Now he was giving Reuben brisk directions. Reuben had to interrupt, ask him to wait while he tore around, searching for a pen. He opened a novel that he pulled down from the bookshelf and wrote down everything Dov said on a blank page at the back.

"I will see you..." but he realised the phone had gone dead. Had Dov ended it just like that, or run out of airtime or coins? Was he at a payphone? He carefully tore the page out of the book and stared at the notes he had made and then at the ragged margin which was all that was left of one of the last pages of a novel he had read long ago. He didn't move. Something made him wonder for a second if he had ever before torn a book. It felt unlikely. He was a librarian after all. Then he realised that he was still sitting on the floor.

He missed the first bus. A youngster behind the glass at the ticket office told him the next one departed on the hour.

"Are you sure there's nothing sooner?"

The boy looked up at him for the first time, fixing him with an insolent but questioning stare. Reuben realised he sounded desperate. He sat on a bench in the waiting room. For a moment he felt irritated, with Dov, with himself, with the boy behind the ticket counter. He swore out loud to no one in particular.

"What the fuck?" No one paid any attention. For a moment Reuben seriously wondered if he had spoken out loud. What the fuck was Dov doing in Sinai, for god's sake? How does an Israeli soldier land up in Di-Zahav, or Dahab? Should Reuben be contacting someone, his army base perhaps? He realised he didn't have a clue where Dov was based, or how to get hold of it. He didn't know the name of any of his friends. Did he have friends? He recalled the flat in Tel Aviv. Dov was always going out somewhere, to meet up with "some guys", but he never gave a name or any idea of where they were meeting. Dov had never brought friends to the flat they had once shared.

Reuben realised he had not eaten that morning. Relieved to have something to do, he went in search of breakfast. Suddenly starving, he stopped to buy a couple of apples from a vendor, pulling a few shekels from his pocket. At a street cafe outside the bus station he sat down, ordered coffee and croissants with cheese and jam. He was suddenly exhausted and felt a strong urge to lay his head down on the table but he was worried that he would fall asleep and miss the bus. He thought back over Dov's explicit directions. He had told Reuben which bus to take and exactly where to find it. Reuben felt somewhat comforted as he recalled Dov's familiar, slightly impatient voice, brisk and efficient as usual. But it made Reuben feel like he was the younger one, the person needing help, and he realised Dov had that effect on him.

He ate fast, then stopped to grab some sandwiches at the counter, paying hastily, impatient with the customers ahead of him. Then another queue, this time at the doors of the bus. When they opened, everyone surged forward. Were they all in such a hurry, Reuben wondered? Was each one desperate to reach some place or someone who needed them? He chose a seat near the back.

Reuben suddenly found he was feeling drained. He slumped in his seat and fell asleep almost instantly, waking only for a second when the bus started up, confused until he remembered where he was. He pulled a cardigan from the backpack at his feet and rolled it into a pillow. In minutes he was asleep again.

When he woke it was late afternoon. The bus had stopped. Someone was gently prodding his shoulder.

"Asre', asre'." An elderly Palestinian man was standing in the aisle, nudging him awake. "Asre'," he said to Reuben in an urgent tone. Reuben shrugged, indicating he did not understand Arabic.

Reuben noticed that there were only a few passengers left sitting on the bus, all clearly Israelis. "Move," came an authoritative order in Hebrew from the back of the bus. He

turned in his seat. Four or five heavily armed Israeli soldiers were crowded into the rear, picking out Palestinians and shoving them along with impatient gestures. Some used their guns to prod at the passengers who were crowded in the aisle trying to reach the exit. A soldier stared directly at Reuben, pointed his forefinger at the exit. He said nothing, nodded once with his helmeted head firmly at the bus door. The last person to leave, Reuben stumbled out into glaring sunlight. A silent queue had formed alongside the bus. The heat beat down. Reuben made his way to the back, but was grabbed roughly by a soldier.

"Israeli?" he was asked abruptly. Something made Reuben shake his head. He said nothing. "Passport?" the soldier demanded. He looked quizzically at Reuben and frowned when Reuben produced the green South Africa passport from his bag.

"You not Israeli? Not Arab?" The soldier and Reuben stood side by side, staring at the passport in the soldier's hand. The soldier switched to English, fluent and confident. "Where you from?"

Reuben remained silent. He was aware of all eyes in the queue fixed on him.

"Back," the soldier said, speaking English again, releasing his arm.

"Sorry, what?" Reuben stammered in reply.

The soldier was already walking back to the queue. "Go back in the bus," he called in English over his shoulder.

Reuben watched him walk away. He kept his eyes down as he retraced his steps, aware of hostile glares and the burning resentment directed at him. He sank back into his seat. The Israelis in the bus waited patiently. They appeared unperturbed. This appeared to be familiar to them. Reuben watched from the window. Passengers methodically formed a line and the soldiers made their way along it, at their own pace, demanding papers, inspecting them closely, taking time over each one. They seemed to be in no hurry. It seemed to Reuben that they were enjoying themselves, drawing out the process, talking to each other in loud Hebrew over the heads of the silent queue of Palestinians. The only communication with them was a series of abrupt gestures. Slowly, once their papers had been checked, each passenger joined a separate queue, this time at right angles to the bus. It looked choreographed to Reuben, a silent performance as individuals moved through a practised routine.

The slowly moving line broke abruptly; a young man seemed to be arguing. Four soldiers rapidly surrounded him. Reuben saw a baton raised. He heard a dull thud as it disappeared into the knot of armed men who then dispersed to resume their positions moving along the queue. It took only a couple of minutes and the slow dance in the desert continued,

though now people had to step briefly sideways to avoid the body, which lay in a heap. The man looked like he was kneeling, with his forehead lowered. He could have been praying. Reuben watched a red stain spread in the sand forming an almost perfect halo around the bowed head. Then it was over. The soldiers suddenly moved quickly. From where he was sitting it seemed to Reuben that they disappeared. He heard only the sound of a truck revving up and turned around in time to see through the back window a cloud of sand moving rapidly into the distance.

Silence followed. It was broken a moment later as the passengers came crowding back, taking up seats and checking on the parcels and packages they had left behind. With them came a rush of angry exclamations, gesticulating and shouting. A man appeared at the front, one hand pressed to his head which was running with blood. With the other he held fast onto a strap suspended from the bus ceiling. He was swaying slightly. Immediately a woman shifted to make space for him on the front seat. She whipped out a handkerchief and placed it gently but firmly against the man's bleeding forehead, holding it in place as the bus pulled off. Reuben had been sure the man he had seen folded over in the sand must be dead. Now he leant his head backwards, uncomfortably balancing it on the rail of the seat behind him. Reuben felt numbed, disbelieving, and somehow removed from the scene. Two Palestinian women continued a heated discussion across him. Silence then descended like a curtain soon after the bus resumed its journey. The frenzy of angry exchanges stopped as suddenly as they had started. The resigned silence contributed to the sense of unreality. Had it really happened?

So that was a road block? His first. There were no road blocks in the Israel he knew, the Tel Aviv or Haifa of suburbs and grassy lawns and cafes on lively streets. The Israel that he knew belonged to people like Dov. Dov, who had occupied their flat, the surrounding streets, the space itself with a confident sense of ownership. This was very far away from Dov's world, or the world that he thought his son belonged to.

11

Eilat marked the edge of Israel on most maps. But Reuben discovered he still had to reach the border town of Taba, another short bus ride away. To him it looked like little more than a single official building. They reached it late that afternoon, and after a short walk across the border he was in Egypt. No questions were asked. No one seemed at all interested in why a middle-aged South African man was heading into Egypt. The sun was setting by then.

On the Egyptian side he watched as a silent official stamped his passport. He wondered briefly if this would prevent him from returning to Israel. Should he have brought his Israeli passport as well? Probably best to leave it behind, he decided. He imagined border officials questioning Dov. Had they given him a hard time? Maybe it had been the same bored guard. Perhaps he had not even looked up at the young Israeli crossing the border.

During the long bus ride Reuben had fretted about the border crossing, unsure what to expect. On the bus he had repeatedly flipped through his South African passport, surprised to find it was still valid. He wondered why he had renewed it regularly. He had his Israeli passport, and besides, he never travelled. He hadn't left Israel since he had arrived. He tried to recall when that was and realised with surprise that it was more than 20 years ago.

Israel had occupied the Sinai in the Six-Day War. That much he knew. There had been talks. Reuben could not remember when Sinai had been returned to Egypt. He thought it must have been before he and Dov had arrived. He could recall newspaper reports about a visit to Israel by an Egyptian president. Was it Nasser? He could not remember. He wondered how he could have been so oblivious to what had been going on in the country. And why take a small boy across the world to settle in a place that he knew nothing about? He had trusted all he had heard and questioned none of it.

A lot of Israelis fetched up in the Sinai. They had done so for years, ever since the border was re-opened. It had become a place to run to, especially for those had nowhere else to go. The homeless and the hopeless. But mostly it was for tourists, or had been before random attacks on bus tours had been widely published. It was far less popular now, but still known as a destination for serious snorkelers and beach bummers.

Near the Egyptian border post he found a bus station and boarded another bus. It was starting to get dark. By the time they reached Sharm el Sheikh, Reuben could see nothing of the town beyond the lights of the railway station.

Then he was in Dahab. Again he asked himself what Dov was doing there. That was his first thought as the bus halted slowly at a bus station. He stumbled as he climbed down. There was no pavement, just sand. Reuben did not know how long the last bus ride had taken. He had spent most of it dozing or awake but with his eyes closed. Visions turned into dreams as he floated in and out of sleep. Perhaps he had dreamt it all. The soldiers, the blow to the youngster's head, the blood.

He would have to find his way in the dark. He pulled out the paper, which was now unclear after spending the day crunched in his back pocket. He could hardly make out any of the directions that had seemed so clear when Dov had given them to him. There were no street lights. He could hear the sea, but had no idea how far it was. In the end, after he had left behind the strip of almost identical beachfront hotels, it turned out to be a short walk. He found himself in front of a rough wooden door. Was this it? He tried to recall the image he had seen on his computer. That all seemed so long ago, and this place looked very different. He looked again at the scrap of paper with the address. This had to be it. He stood for a while asking himself if this was where he would at last find his son, and wondering again what Dov was doing here. He knocked, hesitatingly at first. The house was more of a shack and it was in darkness. It looked uninhabited. He paused, knocked again, harder this time. Then again. There was no sign of any life at all. Could anyone be living here? From what he could see the door led to a kind of lean-to, not a room fit to live in.

He rubbed his knuckles where they were turning red. His knocking had sounded hollow. The door was probably flimsy plywood on a frame. Reuben wondered if he could knock it down. Shoulder it and deliver a swift kick. He could not imagine himself doing that. He swung around in frustration. Some kids had arrived. From what he could see they were kicking a ball listlessly as they gathered in a close circle in a concrete yard some distance behind him. Bedouins he guessed. They stopped now and then to study him. They were clearly discussing him, but he couldn't hear what they were saying. Anyway he wouldn't have been able to understand their Arabic. They seemed to lose interest. They had obviously decided he was of no importance and returned to their game. There was no one else in sight.

The kids gave a shout in Arabic and there was some cheering. Reuben guessed they were yelling, "goal, goal." He wondered how they could see in the dark to score a goal. The yard was no bigger than six feet across. There was no sign of a goalpost.

He turned back to the door and leaned his forehead against it in frustration. Looked again at his watch. He had been knocking on this door for almost half an hour. Slowly he

turned the door knob. He started as it gave way. It hadn't occurred to him that it could be unlocked. Cautiously pushing it open he peered in from the doorway. Did anyone live here?

"Hello." His voice echoed back at him. "Shalom". It was pitch black inside.

"What the fuck, man. I thought you were going to break the door down."

Reuben recognised his son's voice, but he seemed to be speaking in slow motion. Reuben hesitated. He stared into the gloom, walked hesitantly a few paces down a narrow hallway into a small room, his shoes making a slight squeal of protest with each footstep. His eyes adjusting slightly, he could make out a form lying on a narrow bed against the wall on his right. One knee was bent and leaned against the wall, the left arm trailed down to the floor. It was Dov. The only movement he made was a slow sweeping of his fingertips back and forth along the linoleum floor, as if he was gently stroking something.

"Hey, hi," Reuben broke the silence. There was no answer. "Dov?" Reuben stepped closer. "Shalom."

Dov did not speak. He remained still, stared at the ceiling, then closed his eyes. Reuben made his way across the room. He could see there was a lamp on a table. To his relief it worked, and cast a comforting circle of light. He turned back to study the unmoving figure on the bed.

"What the hell? Heavy night or something," Reuben gave a short laugh.

He looked around. On one side was a closed door. He wondered if it was a bathroom or if someone else was behind that door. If there was a toilet it would probably be outside. Ahead, through an open doorway he could see a kitchen counter with a stacked sink. A broomstick handle was balanced on the cornice across one corner with a couple of empty hangers. Clothes were strewn on two chairs. They were placed formally facing each other, looking incongruous as if expected guests had failed to arrive. A third chair, hard-backed and upright, was in the centre of the room facing a small television set which was on the floor. The only other item in the room was a clotheshorse bearing a pair of jeans, a T-shirt, and a couple of pairs of underpants. Reuben hauled the chair closer to the bed.

"Hey, son, what have you taken? You've taken something, right?"

Dov paused, slowly shook his head twice, eyes closed, a curious smile shaping the corners of his mouth. He had never seen Dov smile in that way before. He had never seen his son like this.

The prone figure looked ten years older. He was smaller and sank into the soft mattress, as if bound to the bed by a curious weightiness.

"Come on Bro. You're stoned, right? You've taken something." Reuben tried again. In the silence he thought he could hear his heart beating. "Bro, talk to me," he said. There was panic in his voice. This was followed by a long silence.

"What's this bro thing?" Dov said suddenly, speaking now in his usual voice. He laughed briefly.

Reuben recognised the familiar tinge of sarcasm. He felt relief and then embarrassment. He had never used the word "bro" before. He wondered if anybody over the age of thirty ever did.

"Oh, maybe it's a South African thing," Reuben tried again. "You know, bro, brother. A way of greeting." He laughed, still embarrassed but relieved to hear Dov sounding in some ways like his old self.

"Bro," Dov repeated it a number of time. He slowly opened his eyes. It looked like an effort. First one eye, then the other. He stared intently at the ceiling. "Bro, brother," he said again, softly. His speaking was slurred.

"Not stoned, no," Dov said. Suddenly his voice was clear again. His eyes focused for the first time on Reuben. "It's that I'm fucked up, you see."

This was Dov talking with his old confidence again, explaining in his usual tone of slight impatience, as if it was he, Reuben, who was unable to understand.

"You get it? Look at me. Do I look okay?"

Dov spoke as if he was posing a perfectly natural question. "No," he replied to his own question.

Now he sounded like the old Dov again, explaining something perfectly straightforward to Reuben but not expecting his father to get it. Reuben realised Dov had often talked to him in this way, with an arrogant confidence, as if he was explaining something that should be perfectly obvious. When had that started, Reuben wondered? For how long had Dov managed to make him, Reuben, feel like the fool?

"Dad, I am fucked, finished," he continued, his tone firm and slightly hectoring. He paused for a while. Reuben could not think of a reply. He could only stare at this unfamiliar figure, unmoving on a tousled bed, but who now was speaking with the assurance of the old Dov.

"Hey, I'm hungry. You hungry?" Reuben tried again. There was no reply. Reuben glanced around, looked at the kitchen, pots and plates piled haphazardly. "Let go out, get something to eat?" he said.

Dov's eyes flittered open and shut. He seemed to be struggling to keep them open. Was he sleepy? Reuben sat back, remained silent. For a long while all he could hear was an occasional shout, probably from the boys in the courtyard. Then he heard a soft swishing sound. At first he thought he could hear the ocean. Then he realised it was the measured breathing of his son. Dov had fallen asleep. Reuben stared at him, watching the regular rise of his chest, struggling to make out the face. It was barely familiar and cloaked in shadow.

He had no idea how long he sat in that position, scared to release his own breath in case he disturbed Dov. As long as his son remained as he was, breathing deeply and sleeping, Reuben would not have to face any questions or have to find any answers. He moved only once, to switch off the light. The sudden dark made him uneasy, until he could make out shapes across the room.

It was still dark when much later he opened his eyes. His shoulder and hip ached. He found himself lying on his side on the linoleum floor alongside the bed. He did not remember moving from the chair during the night. Suddenly wide awake, he struggled to sit upright. He was stiff and cold. For a moment he rolled onto his back, closed his eyes and breathed slowly. With some effort he reached a seated position. A chill swept through him as he saw the bed was empty. It left him suddenly and unexpectedly sweating, despite the cold. At the sound of a cough, Reuben whipped his head around. Dov was standing in the dark and leaning against the wall. He was staring across the room at his father. To Reuben he looked unrecognisable and he wondered if Dov could see him sitting on the floor.

"What now?" Dov said.

Reuben shrugged, staggered as he pulled himself to his feet, then he collapsed onto the bed. Its mattress embraced his stiff body. He felt more tired than he could ever remember. He must have fallen asleep again because the next time he opened his eyes it was light. This time Dov was sitting on the chair, staring at him.

"We must go," Dov said.

"Where to?" Reuben sat up. It had taken him a moment to remember where he was. "Where can we go to?" he asked again.

Dov looked down at the floor. "We can't stay here Dad. It's..." he seemed to be struggling to explain something. "It's not for us," he answered hesitantly.

Reuben understood. Or he thought he understood, but wasn't sure at all. What was Dov doing in a rough outhouse attached to a shack pitched at the edge of the world? He looked uncertainly at his son, but immediately saw from the expression on Dov's face that he wanted no questions.

"You okay?" Reuben had to ask.

Was he asking, or making a statement? Dov did seem fine. Gone was the young man who was unable to stand up and had been making little sense the night before. Reuben stayed where he was on the bed. All he could feel was a sense of relief.

"We must go Dad, come. We need to head home."

Dov was now standing at the window, pulling to one side a sheet that served as a curtain and looking out at the street. He closed it again, leaving a small slither of light which fell across the room.

Something was different now. Dov's tone of voice. It was softer. Not quieter, but somehow more gentle. The anger was gone. Reuben felt like curling up again, but he knew if he did, he would start crying. He didn't know why, but he just knew that tears were close.

"Come, let's go Dad," he repeated, looking outside again, this time through the crack of curtain. With an easy swoop Dov tossed Reuben's bag in his direction. It landed at his feet.

"But where to?" Reuben knew he sounded painfully helpless.

There was a question in his voice which he immediately regretted. He knew he was being of no use, but he hadn't a clue. He desperately wanted to take his son home, but where would that be? His flat In Haifa? Back to Tel Aviv? Was Dov even still living there? He didn't know what home meant to his son.

"Dov," he sat up with a sudden thought. "Remember how we used to hike when you were a little kid, in the Negev?"

Dov was staring at him. Then he turned back to look out the window.

Reuben tried again. "Around the kibbutz. We walked, did some real hikes. Never went very far, but we did hike."

Reuben stopped. He had an idea. It was more than that. It felt like a strong need.

"Let's go on a hike. Let's really do it, get somewhere this time. Finish it, what we never could before."

There was silence at first.

"Dad, what the fuck?" The old irritation in Dov's voice was back. "What are you on about?"

It felt desperately important to Reuben that Dov understand him. "In those days, I never wanted to go back to the kibbutz. I hated returning you to the children's section. I so badly wanted to keep you, carry on walking, with you," he said. He was stammering slightly, sounding hesitant. "But of course, we had to go back. You were young. Too young for a real

hike. And anyway I had to give you back. Get to the fucking tractors or cows or whatever duty I was on…" Reuben trailed off.

He remembered how much the kibbutz had meant to his son. He realised he was holding his breath as he watched Dov, who continued to stare out of the window. Reuben breathed out slowly and waited. He wondered what was going through Dov's mind. Had he wrecked it all, before he had even had a chance to try to fix it? Dov turned to face him, again another inscrutable smile playing across his face.

"A hike, Dad. Are you a tourist now or something?" He laughed then, and Reuben laughed with him.

"Well, maybe it's crazy, a mad idea," Reuben said, uncertain but hopeful.

"Fuck Dad. You want to hike, let's hike then," Dov replied. "There's a bus…"

Reuben wasn't really listening. The tears were threatening again and he was doing everything in his power not to break down. Was Dov allowing him another chance? Was he, Reuben, giving his son a break?

"Can you cross the border?" He tried to sound practical and as if he was in control.

Dov looked at him, amused.

"I mean, you've got an Israeli passport, right? We have to cross back. Into Israel."

Dov looked at him steadily, this time a small sarcastic smile on his face. "I got here, didn't I?" he said.

Reuben felt a strong desire to ask how, but he kept quiet.

"What if they stop you at the border?" His voice sounded uncertain, and he could see Dov's strange smile again.

"So then I'll stay here," he said, shaking his head. "You can go hiking." Reuben's face must have revealed something then because when Dov spoke again it was without the sarcasm.

"Stop worrying, Dad," was all he said.

Reuben sank back onto the bed.

"Ok, what do we need?" he managed to say at last.

12

"What now? Where are we heading?"

Reuben's words were absorbed into the heat. Even talking was an effort. Dov did not reply. A long silence followed. The two men sat on the burning sand. Each leaned back on one elbow, unknowingly mirroring the other. For a long while the only sound was their heavy breathing. It had been slow going from the moment they had climbed off the bus, walking over rocks and soft sand that gave way beneath their feet. The sun was directly overhead.

Reuben tried again. "We can't stay here."

He watched as Dov sat up slowly and tied a kerchief, gypsy-style, over his closely-cropped head.

"You carry a hanky?"

Reuben was surprised, then wondered why he should be. It struck him that he knew so little of his son. It was the first time they had spoken in an hour, perhaps longer. Dov ignored his father. Reuben hadn't expected a reply. He imagined the sound from his words pushing in slow waves through the dense heat. Neither man moved. Side by side, they stared straight ahead. From a distance they could be mistaken for two boulders.

"Why not," Dov said after a while, still staring ahead. He sounded as if he had given it some thought. "Why not here?"

Reuben turned to him slowly. He couldn't help sighing. Dov sat cupped in a hollowed out rock. Reuben stared at his profile. Dark features, chin shadowed. They looked alike, he realised, although Dov was tanned from years of drilling in the sun. Dov's once-shaved head was already starting to sprout tight curls. Reuben wondered how long until it would become an effort to tug a comb through them. It had been so many years since he had tried. He couldn't remember the last time he had seen his hair longer than army regulations permitted. He found himself wondering if Dov's jaw was less square than he had remembered, giving him a softer look. Did Dov have a weak jaw line? He realised that there was something about his son's face that exasperated him, and then he immediately felt bad. Why did it irritate him, he wondered? Dov, tough and strutting Dov. Did he, could he, have the look of someone in need of care?

Had Reuben purposefully refused to see that, back in Tel Aviv? Had he failed to identify the vulnerability beneath the army fatigues, the defiant stance, arms folded

emphasising broad shoulders, legs planted firmly apart? Scorn and derision were reflected even in the way he held himself. Had he, Reuben, chosen rather to look away each time they had faced each other in verbal combat?

Studying his son he had one of those moments of clarity that are gone before there is time to reach out and grab them. It occurred to Reuben that his son's belligerence and sarcasm used to provoke in him more than anger. It also made him uncomfortable in a way he couldn't explain. Was it possible that Dov was calling out for something? Help of some kind? Had Dov been asking for care that Reuben did not know how to give?

Was his familiar anger and impatience no more than his own panic? Did his son's neediness scare him? When they had clashed, so frequently and dramatically, were they arguing or was he fighting off his son's demands? Was his anger directed not at Dov, but at himself for failing to make things right? Had both of them panicked when they realised that neither one could hear the other?

Reuben lay flat on the sand, and then immediately sat up. His lightweight t-shirt gave little protection.

"Fuck, that is hot. Shit, the sand. Like lying on coals," he exploded.

Dov immediately turned to him with a look of derision. He said nothing, but his expression was amused and scornful. That was the Dov he knew. The verbal sparring was just that, anger at finding themselves trapped alone but together in a closed space with no way out. But sitting in the desert, Reuben knew he had never been completely convinced by his son's strutting bravado, even at its most cocky. He turned away and studied the distant mountains. He realised that he had probably not really looked closely at his own son since Dov had become a man. He really had no idea what kind of man Dov had grown up to be.

"I don't mean stay here, right here, in the desert," Dov spoke out again suddenly. He grinned unexpectedly. "But…wherever," his words slid away, his smile fading.

He started again. "There must be a bus stop somewhere." He looked vaguely left, then right, as if expecting one to materialise out of the empty rocky terrain that stretched in every direction.

With an effort Reuben heaved himself to his feet. He reached out to offer Dov a hand, outstretched fingers, blue veins prominent, mapping out dark routes.

"Let's keep walking. We'll take the next ride we come across," Reuben said, already a few steps ahead.

Dov stopped to heave on the backpack and followed, the overhead sun barely leaving a shadow as the two figures crossed the barren terrain.

"You know, we could have been going in circles, maybe one big circle," Reuben spoke again, frowning.

Dov shook his head impatiently. They were heading in a north-westerly direction, he announced firmly. He estimated that if they continued for another four hours, maybe five, they would start to see the sun sink to their right. Reuben first wondered if years in the army left you with some sort of inner compass. Then he thought about turning back, immediately, retracing their steps and returning to the dusty bus stop. Abandoning this crazy idea. There was sure to be another bus before nightfall. They could go wherever it was heading. Maybe back to where this had all started.

Dov had overtaken him, was walking purposefully now. Reuben watched as a bead of sweat slowly made its way down the back of Dov's neck, poised suspended for some seconds before dripping onto his t-shirt, to be absorbed by the slowly spreading darker patch across his shoulder blades and narrowing down his spine. It took the shape of one of those inkblot tests. Reuben idly tried to remember what they were called. Rorschach. Something like that. They both knew it was up to Dov to make a decision. He knew the desert, as far as a desert could be known.

The army base of Nevatim was not far, Dov suddenly announced. "There is a track, more of a dust road. About five kilometres west," he said.

Reuben stopped and stared at him. Dov carried on walking.

"And a village, well what's left of a Bedouin village. We could get some food, a bed for the night."

Reuben swivelled impatiently in a circle, his arms outstretched. Dov had stopped, was watching him now with interest. They both stared at the clear print Reuben's hiking boot had formed in the sand.

"Are those new boots, Dad?" Dov bent down to look more closely. "That's a pretty distinct tread." He looked up at his father with disdain.

Reuben knew you had to break in your boots before attempting a hike. He felt a need to explain. He didn't do much hiking these days. But then he decided to remain silent in the face of Dov's scorn.

The previous night, at the hut, he had been surprised when Dov had agreed to go for a hike. Dov had seemed to relax after that. He had barely listened to his father's preparations and hadn't challenged anything. Not since he was a boy had he been so thoroughly compliant. Reuben had taken charge and it made him feel certain and determined. It struck him now that it was the first time he had felt that way in years.

Had Dov enjoyed being the child again? Reuben knew they had both been thinking back to when they used to hike in the Negev all those years ago. He remembered how Dov had always looked up at him trustingly when he stopped to consult a map. Reuben had enjoyed his son's mixture of trust and awe as he identified their route from what probably looked to the boy like a tangle of possibilities.

When had Dov taken charge again? Now he was muttering about another thing they had forgotten. How had they set off on a hike without a map?

"You never go hiking without a map," Dov said derisively.

Then he shook his head. "It's all in my head, anyway," he said softly. "Every detail. Even the creases where I folded the map." He was silent for a short time, then added, "it will never leave my head. Will I ever be able to wipe it out?" He looked at Reuben briefly, not expecting any answer.

"Anyway, it's not like we have a destination," he snorted. It could have been a laugh. "So what do we need a map for?"

It was another question aimed at Reuben that did not require an answer. Reuben knew Dov was baiting him, criticising him for his lack of preparedness. What use would a map have been? Dov was right. Reuben did not know where he was going, only that he had to get Dov away. The problem was he didn't know which direction to take. That made him angry with himself. He turned to Dov, irritated.

"Well, Christ, man. Which way is it? Are we going the right way?" he asked with an impatient shrug. Dov said nothing. "Let's go there then," Reuben said.

Dov turned to face him. "And then what?" His eyes, now fixed on Reuben, looked almost black. "Then where to?" He emphasised each word, knowing that again his father had no answer.

After a few minutes Reuben spoke again, his anger drained away. "I wonder where we would land up if we just kept on walking. Just walking. The desert can't go on forever."

He heard Dov sigh quietly. From where they stood it looked like the desert stretched endlessly in every direction.

"Dad, we would bump into a nuclear installation or a military base."

Reuben looked at him in surprise. Dov spoke again, clearly irritated. "Well, what? Did you think they would just leave all this for the Bedouins?"

The faint rumble at first sounded like thunder. Unlikely for the time of year, but occasional storms sent trickling springs down distant mountain ravines bringing life to the desert. The two men inadvertently glanced upwards, but it was a cloudless sky. Ahead the

sand was stirring, an isolated sand storm that seemed to be heading their way. They both stopped in surprise, Reuben frowning while Dov stared without moving. The immense silence of the desert remained louder than any other noise for a long time before the approaching growl slowly filled the still air. A jeep emerged, and the silence shattered.

"What the fuck…" Dov looked at Reuben, who was shading his face with one hand. His eyes narrowed as he tried to focus from a distance at the jeep, now rapidly approaching.

"Fuck, what the hell. Is this some kind of mirage?" Dov started laughing. "Where's the palm trees and stuff?"

The jeep was heading straight for them. They could make out a standing figure leaning out, waving a free hand. There were others beside him. "Shii-it. Who would've thought. It's our lift out of here," Dov said. "Did you call a fucking taxi or something?"

They could see more clearly now. There were at least five Israeli soldiers crammed in, and a few more balanced on the tailgate. Whooping and yelling, the soldiers seemed to be on a joy ride. The jeep circled them twice, before coming to an abrupt halt that ended in the rise and fall of a wave of sand.

"There is room for more. Get the hell in, what are you waiting for?" a young corporal yelled. Reuben wondered for a moment if the soldiers were pissed. He hesitated.

"No room left for us." Reuben was polite, making an effort to sound unsurprised, as if encountering military jeeps in the middle of nowhere was perfectly likely. He lifted a hand as if to wave them off.

"So what, you prefer to walk?" the same corporal laughed. Then they were all laughing. "Prefer public transport?" the soldiers laughed harder. Their guns were slung casually on their backs. Only two wore helmets.

"Where are you heading?" the driver called.

"Maybe these two wanna die out here," another yelled. "Sorry to interrupt your stroll along the beachfront". Now all the soldiers were laughing, shoving and slapping each other, enjoying the joke.

Reuben sighed, rubbed his forehead. Maybe a ride to the nearest road? There was a passenger beside the driver. An older man, staring impassively at them. Reuben knew nothing of defence force ranks but this was clearly someone senior. He gave off a sense of authority. The man remained silent, staring directly at them, his face unmoving. Then he looked at something behind Reuben. He leaned back, frowned.

"And what do we have here?" he asked.

His voice was soft. There was a sudden silence in the jeep. All eyes were now fixed on a point some metres behind Reuben. He whirled round. At first he couldn't see anything, then he made out a huddled figure in the sand some distance away. Dov was lying on one side, his arms bound tightly around his torso. Only his feet were moving, scrabbling in the sand as if he was trying to run, forcing him to spin slowly round and round. With the silent soldiers watching, Reuben ran, stumbling over the rocky ground, and crashed to his knees beside Dov. He tried to hold his son still, but could not stop him moving in persistent circles, a sand shrimp trying to bury itself. He was muttering softly.

"What, I can't hear you." Reuben tried to find Dov's hand but was shoved off with a surprising strength. He almost fell over, caught himself as he landed on his backside. For a moment he sat frozen, staring at his son.

"Dov, get up," he was bewildered. "Let's go. We can fit in somehow."

Reuben looked over at the jeep then back at Dov, now spinning in ever-faster circles. Dov stopped suddenly.

"Run Sam. Save yourself," he yelled, before resuming his curious spinning, muttering in words Reuben could not understand. Reuben tried again to stop him and grabbed his shoulder.

"Get up, Dov, get the fuck up. What's going on?"

The senior solder was now standing quietly beside Reuben, who was on his knees in the sand. Reuben could see that he was a good deal older than the others. He was calmly watching Dov. His words were quiet and measured.

"This young man is talking Yiddish. He is begging you to save yourself."

Reuben looked up at the man again and slowly rose to his feet. Together they looked down at Dov.

"He doesn't speak Yiddish." Reuben was shouting although the soldier was barely a footstep away. He crouched down again in panic, looking at Dov. Grabbing his shoulder again he shook his son vigorously, but Dov kept up the spinning and muttering. Reuben stood up.

"What is he saying?" Reuben yelled.

"He wants you to save yourself," the older man repeated patiently, now looking directly at Reuben with a shadow of sympathy. "Take him home," he added quietly. "Take him far from all of this."

He turned away and walked with measured steps back to the jeep, climbed back in and gave a quiet order. The jeep sped off, disappearing in a cloud of sand.

“Dov, what the fuck,” Reuben yelled, watching his son’s circular movement in the sand. Dov stopped suddenly and sat up, facing Reuben.

“Sam,” he said “you must run,” he spoke softly. “They have gone but they will be back.” His voice was quiet but urgent. “Save yourself, Sam.”

“Christ,” Reuben lay back in the hot sand. “Christ,” he yelled out loud. “What the hell?”

He got to his feet and paced in circles, running his hands through his hair. When he swung round to look again at Dov he was on his hands and knees, retching, a pool of vomit in the sand.

13

"Dov, what the hell." Dov seemed unaware of him. "What's going on?" Reuben said, sitting down heavily on the ground. "Why….what? We could have had a lift. Out of here," Reuben looked wildly around him, then focused again on Dov.

"Dov, you spoke Yiddish. You don't know how to speak Yiddish." He voice was quiet now, wondering, staring at his son.

Dov was still lying on his side, curled into a ball. His hands were locked between his knees. He looked back at Reuben, his eyes dark in a face pale as dawn. Reuben reached out again, paused briefly, then placed a hand on Dov's right arm, stroking the soft hair.

"Dad." He spoke so softly Reuben had to move closer to hear him. "Dad," he repeated in the same whisper. "Do you remember the Golem?"

Reuben looked at him warily. He made no attempt to answer.

"Remember, the Golem? That book you liked to read to me? When I was little?"

Reuben turned away from Dov's dark-eyed stare. He nodded, said nothing. Dov was silent for a while, then he spoke again in the same almost breathless undertone.

"The Golem that the rabbi made, out of clay, to protect the Jews. You know the story, Dad. You read it to me, remember?"

Reuben turned back to him.

"Ancient Jewish folklore, Dov. So many stories. They were made up, written to scare naughty children." He fell silent again.

Dov spoke again, louder this time. "Only, the Golem in your book got of control. It was made by the wise rabbi, but then after a while it didn't obey the rabbi. It took on a life of its own, and did terrible things." Dov paused. He appeared to be thinking. "It scares me still." After a long moment he started again. "Have we made a Golem?" Reuben stared at him, puzzled.

"The army. The Israeli Defence Force," Dov emphasised each word. "It's the Golem Dad. Come to life. Out of control." Dov turned again to look at his father. He looked exhausted. "The Israeli Defence Force. Our Golem. It's not protecting us. It's running amok?"

They sat in silence, the sun beating down. Dov turned to lie on his back, limbs stretched out.

"Dad, tell me about Sam," he said. Reuben stared in surprise at the spread-eagled figure.

"What…what do you want to know? Sam is your great grandfather. Was, he was your great grandfather, died years ago." Reuben paused. "We lived with him, you and I. For a few years before we left South Africa. But surely you can't remember him." Reuben could think of nothing more to say.

"Tell me about him. Tell me something about him. Anything."

"Shit, I don't know," Reuben looked around. There was no sign of the jeep. The silence of the desert seemed to ring in his head. He felt he had to say something.

"He was a Bundist. Did you know that? It was a big deal to him. He liked to talk about those things."

Dov interrupted him. "What the fuck is a Bundist? Never heard of it." He sounded interested.

"You don't know about the Bundists?"

Reuben felt relief. This was something he knew about Sam, something he could offer Dov. His son was sitting now, beside him, still pale but with a questioning look. It was an expression that Reuben recognised from years ago when Dov still expected his father to have all the answers.

"They were socialists, workerists, into trade unions."

Reuben found it hard to answer. In his mind he still held the frightening picture of Dov out of control and clearly terrified. How could they now be having a discussion, about the Bundist movement of all things? But Dov kept staring at him. He seemed to have forgotten the incident. It was as if they were resuming a conversation. Reuben tried to focus. Dov was waiting for an answer. It seemed important to him. Reuben tried again.

"Opposed to Zionism, you know. They were into 'Workers of the World Unite', that sort of thing." Reuben realised he didn't know all that much more about the Bundists. He struggled to recall anything else Sam might have told him.

"I think it all came unstuck though with the Russian Revolution. I guess not so popular with Lenin and his crowd."

"Dad, what's this got to do with anything." Dov sighed. He sounded disappointed, as if the answer was of no help to him at all. "Anyway, I thought the Russians hated all Jews. The pogroms, remember. They drove Jews out of Russia. What does this matter to me now? What are you talking about, anyway." Dov sounded exasperated.

"It was what he believed, Sam did. Always a socialist. He filled my head with it. I guess that's why I brought us to Israel." He turned to look at Dov whose eyes were closed but Reuben could see he was listening. He went on.

"Much later Sam softened up about Israel, never Zionism, but he believed in the kibbutz, the socialist dream. He was all for it."

Reuben stopped, but Dov had opened his eyes and was looking at him closely. He wanted more, something to go on. Reuben felt as if his son expected some kind of explanation.

"We left South Africa. I mean we had to go. There was the army, the..." Reuben realised he no longer knew what had driven them from South Africa. Everything he had fled from had resurfaced in Israel. "I didn't know where to go, and then I remembered Sam, what he used to say. He talked a lot about kibbutzim. The communal childcare. Everything shared, everyone equal. That was your great-grandfather." This seemed to agitate Dov even further.

"So it was him, Sam? He sent us here. He started it all?"

Dov's anger made Reuben flustered. He didn't know how to answer. They were both silent again. Dov was now on his feet. It was his turn to pace in small circles. Suddenly he spoke again.

"Tell me how he escaped."

"Escaped? Escaped what?" Reuben was trying to work out what Dov was talking about.

"The Nazis. The Holocaust," Dov sounded exasperated. "He must have told you something."

Reuben paused. "Well, nothing. No, he never said anything."

He tried reaching back into his memory, searching for something he could tell Dov. "Your great grandfather, he never talked much. Socialism, that's about all I remember, now that I think about it. Nothing more, really." It was a paltry answer but it was all he could come up with.

"Dad, for god's sake. He was in Germany, right?" Reuben nodded, realising then that he wasn't even sure of that. "So he escaped the Nazis. How?" Dov was angry. "You must know, someone must have said something."

"We didn't talk about it, as a family," Reuben spoke softly. "The Jews from then, that time. They didn't like to." Again it sounded meaningless.

"Come on...you must have, I don't know. You must have heard something." Reuben was shaken by the sneer on Dov's face. Why was Dov so angry with him?

"Dov, really. We didn't."

Dov swung away from him. He shrugged on the backpack, tightened the straps with a sharp tug.

Getting to his feet Reuben tried again, speaking softly, calmly, "Dov, our family never talked about the Holocaust. It never came up."

Then Reuben suddenly remembered something: "There was a sister."

How could he have forgotten? Dov swung round to face him. He looked serious. He seemed to be holding his breath. Reuben paused. Why could he not remember more?

"I think her name was...no. I don't recall." He watched in silence as Dov sighed with frustration.

"What happened to her?" he asked, looking closely at Reuben.

"You know what happened to her. There may have been others too. I don't know." Reuben felt helpless. Why did Dov need to know more? Hadn't he heard enough?

"Dad, say it. They died. In the death camps."

Reuben nodded, made as if to walk on. Dov grabbed his arm.

"Which camp?" His hand felt heavy on Reuben's arm. He turned to face his son. Dov was making him uneasy.

"Dov, shit, I don't know. I don't know which camp exactly. Why must you know which camp?"

He pulled his arm free and walked on.

"They died, in a gas oven. Like so many others."

Reuben walked on swiftly. He was on a hike, for heaven's sake. In the desert, with his son. Like old times. Why was Dov asking about concentration camps out of the blue like this? Yet Dov seemed to need more.

"He probably got out in time," Reuben tried again. "Your great grandfather." He tried to recall what he knew, when were the last European refugees were allowed into South Africa? There were boatloads, he knew that much. And then they were no longer permitted.

"He must have arrived during the thirties. He probably saw what was coming, got out when he could." Reuben wracked his brain. What else could he remember? Dov was right. How come he knew nothing about this?

"He was smart, your great-grandfather," he tried again. "Always a Bundist, a socialist. Workers' rights. Couldn't tolerate South Africa, what was going on. Maybe it was him that got me thinking. About apartheid, colonialism, the terrible things..."

He wondered if even that was true. There were the books, of course. Thinking back to the room he had shared with his grandfather, he realised that was all he could remember. Books, not many, but Sam returned to them every night.

"Your great-grandfather, yes, smart. He liked to read. He read most of the time, when he wasn't in the shop," Reuben spoke more forcefully now, tried to sound certain. He remembered a silent old man, bent over books. Sam would stand in front of the planks, held in place by stacked bricks, books lined up neatly in two, maybe three rows.

"Sam liked to read standing up," Reuben remembered, picturing his grandfather's back, rocking and swaying as he swiftly turned the pages. Reuben wondered suddenly if Sam had been praying, even though he had always scorned religion.

Dov caught up with him, stood in his path and placed his hands on his father's shoulders.

"Dad, you must know what happened. You know more." Reuben shrugged, attempted to free himself, to keep walking. He felt Dov's fingers close in. His grip was surprisingly powerful.

"I don't know more. Why must you know?" he looked closely at Dov. "Why ask more. We have to leave this behind. Move on. That's what we have to do, what we're trying to do."

Dov dropped his hands to his sides. His face was a cold sneer, but he let out a brief laugh.

"Leave it behind? That's what you're trying to do, you say? Crap, Dad. You, your generation, maybe you won't talk about it but you will never let it go. You know that. It's something you can't let go of." Dov turned around, his back now to his father.

"You are all lying. You will never forget. You don't want to, because then you will have to forgive. And you can't, won't, do that."

Both men stood in silence, facing the mountains in the distance.

"We must move on," Reuben said softly.

For a long time Dov said nothing. Reuben hoped he would say no more. He started to walk, making his way carefully over a sharp rock, concentrating on keeping his balance.

"Move on? Where? Look at us. We have been walking the whole day and we're still where we've always been." Dov clenched his fists. "We, we Jews, Israelis. We can't move on," Slowly he rolled his head back, eyes closed. Reuben watched, mesmerised, as the tendons on Dov's neck protruded, his mouth shaping a silent roar. Dov slowly rolled his head forward until his chin rested on his chest.

“We will never forget,” Dov said. “My kids. Their kids. The next generation. We will hold onto our fear, always afraid that we are under attack. Even if today is peaceful, we worry tomorrow may not be.”

He opened his eyes. They were centimetres away from Reuben’s. For a moment they stared directly into the other’s face. Reuben was surprised to find his son was exactly his own height.

14

"Tell me something Dad," Dov sounded almost plaintive. "Something from my past."

"I do have a story," Reuben suddenly recalled, relieved. "I remember Sam told me a story once, about his mother coming over on the boat. From Russia. Your great-great-grandmother. She had this plush black evening gown decorated from throat to ankle with 100 glassy, round buttons. The story goes that she cut every button off that dress and gave them to her four young sons to play marbles on the long journey to South Africa. That's when they fled the pogroms. Maybe early 20th century."

Dov and Reuben stood in silence for a long moment. Then Dov laughed.

"That's bollocks, Dad." He laughed harder. "Dad, she was a peasant from the shtetl. What would she want with an evening gown? How'd she get such a thing?" he laughed louder.

Reuben smiled uncertainly. "No, really. He told me that. Or someone did. We kids grew up with that story."

"Not likely, Dad," Dov was laughing loudly now. Reuben paused, bemused, then chortled quietly.

"Dad, she was hardly going to be invited to the Czar's for dinner." Now both were laughing. "Anyway, how could a dress, even a full length gown, have 100 buttons?"

Reuben kept quiet for a while. He had held doggedly to that story for as long as he could remember.

"You know the rest," he said. "The older brothers went to Africa first. I don't know when. They earned the money for the boat, the tickets for the rest of the family."

This part he was sure of, it was family lore. Sam, or was it an older brother – Reuben couldn't recall a name. He did what all new arrivals from the Old Country did. He became a travelling salesman in the towns that had mushroomed up along the gold reef. He raised enough for the fares and sent the money home, to his mother and younger siblings.

"That's how we came to be in South Africa, Dov," Reuben concluded. He felt a small sense of triumph at being able to deliver at least something. But Dov raised an eyebrow.

"Dad, that's the story of every South African Jew of your generation." He laughed again, but Reuben saw doubt in his expression. "But it doesn't make sense." Dov now looked smug. "How come Sam landed up in Germany? Twenty, thirty years later?"

Reuben had no answer. No one had ever said. He had never thought to ask. Had Sam as a young adult gone back home, or to the closest place he could reach, which would have been Europe? Why? In search of something he had left behind? Did he return to South Africa when he found it? Or did he not have enough time to look, before he had to leave again? Still laughing quietly, Dov turned his back on his father and the two set off again, walking in silence. Reuben felt he had failed his son.

He thought back to Sam. Was there more to tell? He remembered something else about his grandfather. His drink was vodka. Hard to detect, you cannot smell vodka. He recalled a tray, every night, a glass with ice and the bottle of vodka. He did not tell Dov. They walked in silence. It was getting dark now. Dov was walking into the sunset and Reuben could see only the outline of his son's figure several paces ahead.

"You called me Sam," said Reuben after a while. "You told me to save myself," he said.

Dov glanced round at him, kept on walking. He shrugged, looked away, his dark eyes on the horizon.

"Save me…from what? Who?"

Dov stared into the distance.

"Dad I don't know." He stared straight ahead.

Reuben knew that tone. Dov had had enough, he did not want to talk. But Reuben couldn't stop.

"Why didn't you just get on the jeep?" he said with some exasperation. "We would be there by now. Well, I don't know where. But somewhere. And this village, where is it? Where are these Bedouins? Don't they move around, aren't they supposed to be nomads. How are we going to find them?"

Dov laughed again, bitterly, Reuben thought.

"Well fuck, Dad 'these Bedouins,' don't move around anymore, Dad. Unless they are forced to. They've been driven into official settlements, what we'd call slums I guess." He laughed again, that same bitter tone, the corners of his mouth upturned in that strange smile.

"You sure you know where you are going, son? Are you sure we're not lost?" Reuben felt a moment's panic. Were they lost in the desert? He had been convinced his son could lead the way.

"Don't worry Dad." Dov sounded tired. "This village hasn't disappeared." He laughed, then stopped abruptly. "We, Israel, we have been trying to get rid of all these villages, doing our best to make them go away. We knock them down. With bulldozers. The

next week they're back. Every time we try, but they won't go. We think they have given up. When we come back, there they are again, new shelters, tents...they're back," Dov spoke in a tone of disbelief, as if talking to himself.

"I know my way there, Dad, done this often, found my way in the dark. How many times have I been there? Four, five? I don't know. It was long ago but I can't forget."

It was getting darker.

"Dad," Reuben had never heard him speak with this voice before. "This is it. No more. No more again," he paused. "I am not getting into a military jeep again. Ever. It's over." His voice softened. It sounded disembodied in the dusk.

Dov was now walking fast and steadily. He almost seemed to be marching. Reuben was soon breathing deeply, sweat running. In the dimming light he could still see Dov ahead of him, his legs pumping rhythmically. Reuben marvelled at his pace. He looked like he could go on forever. Even in the weak light he could see the muscles in his son's calves. He watched with fascination as they stretched and gave way, each leg in turn, never missing a beat. Reuben was flagging. He struggled to catch his breath.

"Hey, wait up," he called out.

Dov either did not hear or ignored him. One two, one two.

"Shit, Dov. Wait, I can't keep up." Reuben stumbled, felt himself floundering. "What's the army done to you? Turned you into some kind of machine? Fucking fit you are."

Reuben was looking down at his feet and did not see Dov halt suddenly. He felt a sharp jolt, almost a punch, and realised he had walked right into his son, colliding with a force that winded him, caused one leg to trip over the other. He struggled to keep from falling, grabbed at Dov, catching hold of the rucksack on his back. It steadied him, but Dov whipped round so fast that he ripped it out of Reuben's reach. The movement was sudden, angry. Reuben lost his balance, collapsing into the sand. He lay still for a moment, struggling to catch his breath. The marching pace had left him panting. Or was it the aggression in Dov that had punched the air out of him. Struggling, the sand giving way as he battled to right himself, he gave up, seated himself where he was, drew his legs close to his buttocks and leaned back on both elbows. Reuben closed his eyes, listening to his breath slowly calming.

"What did you just say, Dad?"

Reuben looked up. Dov was a solid figure directly ahead of him, dark against what was left of the light. Reuben's first thought was that the impact seemed to have had no effect on him. He stood, unmoved.

"What did the fucking army do to me?" Dov's words shot out. "Christ, fuck...Dad."

Reuben watched, frozen, as Dov struck out, hands clenched, punching each fist in turn into thin air. Five, six punches that landed nowhere. Each blow angrier. Reuben slumped lower in the sand, ducking involuntarily at each thrust.

"What did the army do to them? That's what you should be asking."

Dov spun round and placing his hands on his knees, he doubled up, grunting with each retch until he vomited, a dark gush that left him gulping, breathing hard. He stood abruptly, and spat furiously into the sand. Wiping his mouth with his left hand, he reached out with the other. Reuben flinched for a second, then grabbed the hand and found himself hauled abruptly to his feet. He realised the strength in his son scared him.

"Let's go," Dov muttered. He was walking more slowly, and Reuben kept up, suddenly cold as the desert night moved in. After a long stretch of silence Dov spoke quietly. Reuben couldn't hear at first. Then Dov spoke clearly, his voice quite normal.

"I am not going back." He said nothing more for a while. Then he started up again. Still walking, Dov spoke. "What did the army do to me?" Reuben followed in silence. Dov was now a dark shadow and Reuben had to speed up to keep him in sight. He was afraid he would lose Dov in the dark.

"Dad, I don't know." Reuben struggled to hear what Dov was saying. He was talking softly now, addressing the darkness ahead of him.

"I can't answer...you wouldn't want to hear. The rapes, the brutality. The viciousness, you know, dogs, guns." This time he turned to look at Reuben briefly. Reuben wondered if Dov could see him in the dark. Dov spoke again.

"There was a cruelty that does not belong to humans. You can't...don't try to imagine it, Dad".

He turned back to the night ahead of him. They kept on walking, Reuben almost bumping into him. He was cold, and uneasy. It was now pitch dark. Later Dov spoke, again almost talking to himself. "Once you have seen the worst side of human nature you will never be able to look at a human face in the same way again."

They walked on in silence. Dov was suddenly calm. He dropped back and walked alongside his father, almost companionably, but the unease in Reuben grew. He was tense, braced against the cold, and felt an unknown throbbing dread.

"Take my hand, dad." Dov said after more time had passed. He was now barely visible. "It gets dark suddenly here. If you lose sight of me you won't know where you are." Reuben looked at the outstretched hand. It looked colourless in the fast fading light. "Hold on, Dad. You can easily get lost." Dov sounded impatient.

He tentatively took hold of his son's hand. He felt Dov grab it, a strong grip. It did not feel like the hand of his son. He remembered when his son's hand was small and soft, fitted snugly into his father's palm. Remembering brought a surge of pain. He gasped. Dov heard his sharp intake of breath, misunderstood it.

"Yes, there it is. It's never going to go away." Small lights flickered at a distance. "You thought I had got us lost, right?" Dov's voice was soft now. "ETA about an hour," he announced. Almost immediately his voice dropped to a whisper: "Will I ever be able to get lost in the dark?"

They headed for the distant lights. Hands clasped, with Dov leading the way. It made Reuben feel uncomfortable. When last had he walked hand-in-hand with his son? And then it was he who had led the way. After a while Reuben broke the silence.

"How far d'you think?" Reuben asked. The lights were still clear but seemed no nearer. "What do you reckon?" Dov didn't answer. He strode on, unfaltering. The dark didn't seem to bother him. Reuben could sense his son's steady stride, even though he could no longer see him.

"How much further? Can you tell," Reuben asked again. Dov laughed suddenly, making Reuben jump.

"You should ask instead how far we have come?" he said.

Reuben puzzled over this slowly. Dov spoke out again.

"First you must ask how far you have come, before you try to work out how far you still have to go."

Reuben remained silent, but Dov went on, now chatting almost amicably. It struck Reuben as painfully incongruous. If it hadn't been for his persistent sense of grim fear he could be out for a stroll with his son.

"How far have we come, Dad?" Dov continued, in the same tone.

Reuben attempted a reply. "I have no idea. We have been walking for, what, about five, six hours..."

Dov interrupted him. "I estimate we have walked 15, maybe 18 kilometres," he said with certainty. "No Dad, I'm asking how far since we left, what was it first, Russia or Lithuania? Latvia? Then where were we? Germany. South Africa. This place? This place we call home. Or were the other places home? Were they all home?" Dov's question hovered for a moment in front of them and then vanished.

Reuben shook his head. He suddenly felt angry.

"I tried, fuckit," he said. He and Dov stopped walking, both surprised at the anger in Reuben's voice. Reuben removed his hand from Dov's grasp.

Dov was silent, then spoke softly. "Tried what, Dad?" Was that sympathy that Reuben detected? They resumed their steady walking in the dark.

"Tried what?" Dov repeated, this time louder.

Reuben found he had no answer. What exactly had he been trying to do? Whatever it was, he had been trying all his life. He suddenly felt furious. With Dov and himself.

"This was going to be home. That's what I thought." Reuben spat out. "So it didn't work. I'm sorry." He calmed down a little. "I didn't know it would be like this."

The two of them now walked side by side. Unable to see anything at all they occasionally bumped against each other. Reuben found himself awaiting each brief brush of his son's arm against his own. Cold, but solid, it was calming, that and the sound of sand shifting under their feet.

"Fuck, I'm freezing," Dov said suddenly.

Reuben remained silent. Night had brought an icy bite. He was walking robotically, every part of his body tensed against the cold. He remembered something.

"Hang on. I've got something." He felt a sudden relief. "That jacket, the one made in Sweden. I packed it, added it at the last moment." Reuben was now scrabbling at the backpack on Dov's back, struggling to find the tag on the zip. He couldn't get a grip, his fingers were trembling violently. Was it from the cold? It suddenly seemed terribly important that he find this jacket. It was one of those scientific designs, kept the cold out, stored the body's warmth.

"Got it," he had the backpack half unzipped, but could feel the synthetic fabric he was looking for. It was near the top. Something had made him shove it into the backpack at the last minute.

"Here, Dov," he tugged it out, feeling a kind of triumph. He reached out into the darkness. Where was Dov?

"Well put it on, Dad." Dov replied. It sounded like he was a short distance ahead.

Reuben stopped short, surprised. "No Dov, it's for you. You must wear it."

His voice was trembling, his teeth clattering in the cold.

"I brought it for you. Just in case." He realised none of that was true. He hadn't expected to be in the desert after nightfall. He had stuffed it into the bag as an afterthought. Now it seemed important that Dov use it.

“It’s very effective against the cold.” Was it his shivering that made him sound shrill. “It’s for you, son. You must wear it.”

He doubted that Dov believed him but something in his voice must have reached Dov. After a few seconds he felt a firm grasp on the jacket that he was still holding out at arm’s length. The sound of rustling fabric as Dov pulled it on almost blocked out his next words.

“Thanks, Dad,” he said softly.

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Reuben suddenly could hardly put one foot in front of the other. The last stretch, how long had it been? Dov had maintained an even pace, certain of his destination, while Reuben had found himself stumbling in the sand and groping through impenetrable dark. Uneasy, he wished he could see Dov. But he could hear his son's even breathing and steady pacing nearby.

The Bedouins watched in silence, their faces shadowed by the glowing firelight, as the two men appeared out of the dark. Dov approached the nearest group, his arms held high as if in surrender. Reuben could make out a few tin huts and some rough shelters. Further campfires showed more makeshift structures. From what he could see there were about fifty people. Perhaps there were more in the shadows. He stumbled over rubble at his feet, and caught himself by grabbing at what seemed to be a wall, or a part of one.

As they approached, Dov spoke Arabic, which surprised Reuben. He addressed the nearest group. They stared back in silence, studying the two with suspicion. A man, about Reuben's age, stepped forward, making him start. He slowly circled first Reuben, then Dov. Apparently satisfied, the man stopped, face to face with Dov. He said a few words in Arabic, then nodded in the direction of an elderly man sitting in a chair some way off who had ignored them so far. He continued to stare straight ahead as Dov approached him. Reuben assumed him to be a leader of some status. Dov crouched beside the chair. Reuben couldn't hear anything but Dov seemed to be haggling, all the time maintaining a deferential pose. The old man listened impassively then shrugged, looked away. Dov waited then pulled something out of his back pocket. It looked to Reuben like a wad of shekels. After a pause the old man took it, nodded, and issued a sharp command. Dov returned, grabbed Reuben's hand, pulling him towards a makeshift shack. They crouched to enter and Dov pulled again at his hand, indicating that Reuben should sit.

They were alone. By the light of several candles Reuben could make out a spacious area under canvas. The ground seemed almost entirely covered in rugs, the colours deep and glowing in the candlelight. He found himself stroking the rough fibre of a carpet that he was sitting on. His other hand, he noticed with surprise, was still in Dov's tight grip. A row of cushions lined one side. Reuben could feel more behind his back. He lay back gratefully, but his discomfort grew.

"I don't think we should be here Dov," Reuben whispered.

Dov turned to face him. In the flickering light his face looked stony.

"Well, fuck, Dad, you're spot on there. No, we should not be here. We never should have come here, but we did anyway."

He was talking loudly, and Reuben, looking warily into the half dark, was taken aback by the anger in his son's voice.

"Dov, what the fuck are you talking about?" Reuben whispered.

A younger man emerged from behind the tent, and watched them, his face wary, alert. Another followed. Reuben could feel their hostility.

"If we had not come here, us, Israel, these guys would be, I don't know, okay. Living their lives in their way. Just as they always had." Dov leaned in closer. "How many times have I been here, to remind them who's the boss, kick in a few shacks. Though they just built them again after we left. Over and over again. It's all a fucking crazy contest."

Dov was staring at the youngsters, his face tight with rage, and something more. Something close to shame. They returned his angry gaze, unmoving. In the firelight beyond them the old man could be seen sitting in the shadows, his face still turned away, apparently indifferent to the visitors.

A woman covered in shawls appeared with a tray. She stooped swiftly and laid it at their feet, disappearing immediately around the back of the tent. In silence the two contemplated the spread before them. Reuben was surprised to discover how hungry he was. He glanced at Dov, who was already breaking off pieces of thin Bedouin pita, scooping hungrily at the thick tahini, homemade pickles, spicy roasted peppers and tomatoes that Reuben knew as *matbuha*, and fried eggplant. They forgot about everything else, eating side by side in silence.

After a while the old man entered, which seemed to signal the end of the meal. The tray was swept away. Reuben found himself almost dozing. He could hear Dov speaking Arabic. Then the old man looked hard at Reuben. Reuben felt uncomfortable under his silent stare, his eyes half covered by his keffiyeh. His unblinking gaze conveyed a sense of disapproval. What exactly had Dov told him? Reuben looked away. Here was someone who had agreed to provide him shelter and share his food, but he couldn't shake off a sense that the Bedouin was seeing him, not as an Israeli, the enemy, but as a man, a father like himself. Even worse, he felt he was finding him wanting. More men entered the tent, their conversation filling it. They sounded angry. He heard Dov talking, his voice pushing its way through the conversation, past voices that were coming from all directions.

Then Dov's voice reached him again, speaking English. "The Israelis have destroyed this camp, tried to, a few times. The people have nowhere else to go. They live in whatever shelters they can." Reuben nodded, more asleep than awake. "Their nomadic life was destroyed years ago," Dov said.

After that Reuben must have fallen asleep. It couldn't have been for very long, but when he awoke the other men and their angry unknown voices were gone. How long had they stayed, he wondered? Suddenly wide awake, with no trace of the day's exhausting hike, he stared into the dark, the silence sheltering him, heavy and warm as the rugs that now covered him. He wondered who had placed them there. Had it been Dov? He waited as long as he could.

"Dov," he whispered, then repeated the name more loudly.

He heard his son stir. Reuben had to ask.

"So what do you remember of him?

He heard Dov sigh in the dark and shift. "What the hell are you talking about Dad?" His voice was muffled with sleep.

Reuben knew that Dov knew exactly who he was talking about. He just wanted to hear his father say it.

"You know, your great-grandfather. My grandfather. Sam. When did he teach you to speak Yiddish?"

Dov sighed again, this time with some exasperation. "I don't know Yiddish."

He rolled over and pointedly turned his back on his father. Reuben realised this was going to be difficult. He waited in silence for as long as he could.

"Dov, you spoke Yiddish...that major, or whatever he was, he said so. That you were speaking Yiddish. When did you learn to speak Yiddish? I don't get it."

"Dad, that 'whatever' was a major general. Pretty senior in the ranks you know."

"Dov, how come you can speak Yiddish?"

For a long time he was silent. Reuben began to wonder if he had fallen asleep again.

After a while Dov mumbled an answer. "I can't, I mean I don't." His voice sounded firm, but at the same time uncertain.

"But you were, you were saying something..."

Dov sat up. "He, Sam, he talked to me in Yiddish when I was a little kid," Dov said quietly. "I'm guessing that's what it was."

"But when?" Reuben was uncomfortable. It didn't make sense.

"He lived with us, remember," Dov yawned as he spoke."Or he talked Yiddish to someone who he confused with me. Only there was no one else there," Dov said softly. "Maybe he needed someone to talk Yiddish to." Dov shrugged, then he lay back, and pulled the covers over himself.

"Dov, please don't do this." Reuben knew he sounded desperate. "Just tell me. Your great grandpa..."

"Great-grandpa!" Dov interrupted him. "Grandpa," he sounded both bitter and at the same time amused. "Dad, that was no grandpa. That was one scary fucker."

Dov was fully awake now.

"Who? Sam? Sam wasn't scary," Reuben laughed, but Dov remained silent. "He wasn't really anything," Reuben added.

"Dad, your grandfather was a bad ass. And I've known a couple of real fuckers in the army. No one has ever scared me like he did. That face. Did he ever smile?" Dov snorted suddenly.

"My great-grandfather. He wasn't ever my anything. Just this crazy old man who spoke to himself in some kind of weird language."

"Sam?" Reuben was surprised. "I don't remember that. I mean, yes, when I was a kid, he would do that kind of rumbling talking to himself. I guess I stopped listening to it, or something, got used to it. I had forgotten..."

Dov interrupted. "Jesus, Dad. You forgot? How can you forget? How old was I when we lived together in that gloomy apartment? We were still back in South Africa then. This weird dude with his mumbo jumbo."

Dov stopped. He was quiet for a moment. "How long was it, for a couple of years maybe. But that was the backdrop to my childhood."

Reuben was stunned. How old was Dov then? Four, five years maybe, not older than six. Anyway how long had they shared a flat with Sam? How much could Dov possibly remember? Dov was talking again.

"Christ, when he was, in talking all loud this weird language? Fast, and kind of crazy. His eyes would go all dark and staring. I wanted to run away but he kind of pinned you down, and you just had to sit still and listen 'til he was done. Then you could get away as fast as you could. I would run the hell away from him."

Reuben was taken aback. "No, Dov. No. I don't remember any of that."

His recollection of Sam was of a silent presence, barely there. All he ever recalled Sam talking about was the workers' revolution. How could they have known Sam so differently?

"I don't remember him talking loudly. Sam? No, never." He laughed again. "I suppose he must have spoken to me sometimes. Maybe it was Yiddish. I don't remember. Or maybe I switched off. Maybe I just stopped listening, or never really heard him after a while."

He laughed again quietly to himself. "Where was I, I mean when he got all crazy and talked out loud, scaring you like that?"

Dov was silent for a long while.

Then he said, "Yes, Dad, where were you? My mother. I know we had left her behind. But where were you?"

Reuben was confused for a moment.

"What do you mean? Where..?"

"You said 'Where was I?' Good question Dad. But it's my question, not yours. I get to ask it." Dov was speaking sharply now, his voice raised. He waited a moment. "Well, Dad, I asked you a question: Where the fuck were you? All that time."

Reuben felt a flush of anger.

"Dov, hold on. I was there, remember. I was the one who was there. Or have you forgotten? I took you away from that crazy nutter, your mother. Her politico bullshit. You were just a little kid then. Fuck, and I took care of you. A single parent."

Reuben stopped. He was surprised at how angry he was. He wondered if Dov could even remember his mother. Reuben could barely picture her himself, it was all so long ago. He smiled sadly. It had been a long time since he had thought about Emma. Lovely Emma. She had been so intense. That was when they first met. He recalled late nights spent talking. About apartheid. The SB, the Security Branch. She spoke so intensely about the need to take up arms. At first all of it had thrilled him. He was intrigued, but then he became uneasy.

Reuben suddenly had an urge to tell Dov why he had taken him as a small sleeping boy away from his mother, lifted him from his bed one night. Emma watched from the bedroom doorway without speaking. Reuben had expected her to make a fuss, at least tears. He was surprised but mostly relieved that Emma made no attempt to stop him. She must have known it was the right thing, the only way. There was a constant fear in that house. Secrets and hidden things. Did Emma know another arrest was inevitable? She watched in silence and did not move from her post, leaning against the doorway, as he took Dov and left.

He took Dov to the only place he could think of – the flat his mother had grown up in, where he, Reuben, had once lived when he was a very small boy. He had arrived late at night, carrying a sleeping Dov, whose head he struggled to steady from rolling off his shoulder. In his free hand he had carried a duffel bag, mostly packed with Dov's clothes and a few toys. The child hadn't stirred until he woke up the next morning, sitting up sharply and staring curiously around at the unfamiliar surroundings. As his face crumpled and he made as if to cry Reuben stopped him immediately, distracting him by offering a box of Rice Krispies that Reuben had the presence of mind to toss into the bag before walking out the door.

Dov seemed to decide not to ask any questions, but he watched his father's every movement as if uneasy to let him out of his sight. That first day especially, and for some days after that, he would say him mother's name out loud. "Emma," he would say and look intently at Reuben, who ignored him each time. He had never before heard Dov call his mother by her first name.

Sam was already living in the silent Yeoville flat when Reuben arrived. He was using the room at the end of the passage. Sam's presence had not disturbed the sense of abandonment that the flat had acquired over the years. Reuben barely noticed him. It was going to be for a couple of days he had told Emma, but he never returned to her, except on a few occasions to collect some of his and Dov's things. Clothes, more toys.

Emma kept her silence, apparently unsurprised to see him and she did not argue. She was always surrounded by people he didn't know. They would abruptly stop their earnest talking whenever he entered the room. Her silence told all that she wasn't telling him. She worked for one of the trade unions that had sprung up in the '70s. But Reuben guessed she was involved in much more than that. It was better that he did not know. That is what she told him anyway. But he could not accept her constant huddle of visitors, and her frequent disappearances without explanation. People came in and out of their house. Some seemed to move in to stay, but left after a few days. Others appeared, often late at night, and were gone when he arrived home after classes, bringing Dov who spent each day at the university crèche.

What was it that finally drove him away? Was it her detention? That was in the early '80s. He couldn't remember how long it had been, but what had made it seem endless was that no one would tell him anything. He never found out where they had kept her. One day she was back, but she told him nothing.

Lying in the dark with Dov something occurred to him. The attraction he felt for Emma, at the start. Could it have been something that reminded him of Sam, and his left-

wing rambling? As a boy it had been incomprehensible to him. He never knew how to respond. But Sam and Emma, they would have had lots to talk about.

When Dov was born, Reuben found he was no longer so interested in the Armed Struggle. His life was about waking at night to give Dov a bottle, bathing him every morning and getting him dressed. A new kind of all-encompassing drive had entered his days. But he was lonely, for those years, when Emma seemed to have forgotten that she was his wife and Dov's mother.

Reuben thought over Dov's words and his anger grew.

"*You* left, Dov, remember." He was trembling. "Can you imagine how many times I asked myself that question? You were barely twenty when you just upped and disappeared. Where were you? Where? No, Dov, my son." He realised he actually spat out the words. "It's my question. I get to ask it – where were you?"

There was silence after that and then he heard the sound of Dov breathing evenly. He had fallen asleep again. In the blackness of the tent Reuben could hear his son shifting, sighing deeply. He pictured him asleep, his face somehow softer. Reuben wondered what time it was. He thought of the angry youngsters, now sleeping. And the old man. Had he given up his shelter for them? The silence was as dense as the dark. Once or twice he heard a dog bark. Otherwise there was no other sound at all. Reuben felt perfectly alone, his son barely a sleeping presence at his side. It seemed impossible to imagine a living, breathing village around them. He rolled onto his back, feeling the rough rugs beneath him.

Once, long ago, he thought he had rescued Dov. This time it was Dov who had rescued him. He lay awake for a long time trying to work out how this made him feel.

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They left before daybreak, stumbling through rubble that had once been a thriving village. Neither spoke. A few people were about. Most of the Bedouin were still sleeping.

Reuben realised the room they had slept in probably was in fact the village elder's home because it was by far the sturdiest structure. It had a roof of overlapping tin sheets. One wall was brick, still standing, although not complete. A gap at the top had been bashed away, neatly, as if a wrecking ball had levelled the wall, leaving an open rectangle below the roof. The other walls were a patchwork of tin. Around him stood a collection of rough tents and shacks of plywood, tin, canvas and cardboard. A couple of thin dogs stopped scuffling in the piles of garbage as they walked past, unsure whether to attack or make a run for it, then settled back to their search through the scraps.

As they made their way unsteadily across what seemed to mark the perimeter of the camp, a call came from behind them. They turned. In the pale light of the approaching dawn they could see a woman, almost completely covered, and waving one hand. She slowed down to a steady walk, breathing heavily as she approached. A layer of her skirt was wrapped around something and she unfolded it as she approached. In silence she offered a pile of steaming pita bread baked that morning. Then she turned and walked away briskly before they could say a word.

They ate as they walked, Dov with a certainty that made Reuben feel uncomfortable. For a long time he said nothing. Then Reuben had to speak.

"You know this place."

It wasn't a question, and he wasn't sure if he would get a response from Dov. He wasn't at all sure that he wanted one, but he had to say something.

"You've been here before, Dov. Haven't you?"

Still Dov said nothing, walking a little faster as if to create some distance between himself and his father. They walked like that, in single file, silent and apart for a long time, chewing on the still-warm pita. Reuben tried a question of a different sort.

"You know where you are going, Dov. Don't you?"

More silence.

"Where are we heading?"

Reuben sounded almost petulant, and when there was still no response he stopped abruptly.

"Dov, where are we?" he repeated.

Dov slowed down. He spoke without looking back at his father. His voice was clear and measured. At the same time he sounded dull, reciting mechanically.

"We are heading east, actually south-east. We will reach a road in about an hour. We turn south and keep to that road. In less than three hours we will reach a bus top. There are regular Egged buses from there."

Reuben picked up his pace, soon walking at Dov's side. He felt both relieved and dismayed. He had nothing else to ask. He didn't want to know any more. For a long time he said nothing. Their silent rhythmic walking was evenly paced. They stepped in time, almost a slow, soporific march.

So he was startled when Dov slumped abruptly, landing at the sand at his feet, his legs tucked beneath him. Reuben stared down at him, then looked around. There was no sight of the village from where they stood. In every direction all was brown sand, and in the distance dramatic hills and rocky valleys. He sat down next to Dov. The silence sang tunelessly.

"If someone knocked down your house, what would make you rebuild it? Time after time after time," Dov looked ahead as he spoke.

Then he turned to Reuben, as if waiting for an answer. Reuben looked at him in silence. He felt a vague nausea. Had Dov taken the wheel of a bulldozer, or kicked down a wall, ripped off canvas and loaded it onto a truck so that it could never be used again for shelter? He said nothing, just looked at Dov, watched as his son slowly nodded as if he had known the answer all along.

"I have done bad things, worse than you can imagine."

Dov's voice was muffled. Reuben didn't want to look at him. Could Dov be crying?

"There was a roadblock." Dov was speaking again, although he kept his head down. "I had my gun. My helmet. I knew how I looked. All of us, we didn't look human. Maybe it was supposed to be a disguise, to scare them, you know. But we came to believe it too. We looked like monsters. And that's how we were supposed to behave."

Now he stretched out his legs and lay flat on his back in the sand. He opened his eyes and stared directly up into his father's face.

"It scared me too, when I looked at the others. I didn't know them anymore. They weren't the guys I knew. Was I one of those?"

Reuben could not look away.

"We weren't people anymore. Humans like them. That uniform. The power it gave us. We were monsters."

For a long time Dov said nothing, while Reuben continued to stare. Then abruptly Dov closed his eyes. Reuben guessed Dov couldn't say what he had to say directly under his father's gaze. If Dov opened his eyes he would be staring straight into Reuben's. Dov turned his head slightly.

"I...we. No, it was me. I did it," Dov started again.

This time Reuben turned away, almost turning his back on his son. He didn't want to hear more.

"There was a girl. A woman. But young. I could tell, even though she was covered. And her stomach, it looked like even her burka had no space for it. The baby, I mean. It must have been very near her time." Dov nodded, slowly. "She needed a doctor. I mean. I couldn't understand what she was saying. She was hysterical. But of course I knew. It was closed, the road crossing. Her mother, it must have been her mother. She was crying and pulling. Pulling me. She held on to my arm. I couldn't get away. I tried to push her away. But she hung on to me and she begged me. She spoke Hebrew, bits of it. And I understood her Arabic. I didn't need it, though, to know. She begged me. She wanted me to help her daughter.

"I was trying to pull my arm free. The mother held on, and we were going round in circles. And the guys were laughing at me. I couldn't shake her off. And then I saw the girl. She was lying on the sand. She was groaning, screaming. I think it was coming. The baby. And the guys, they did nothing. Only kept on laughing at me. Like the girl wasn't even there. And the old hag stuck to me. And the girl wouldn't stop. I had to stop the screaming. It had to stop. Could no one else hear it? Like an animal we once shot. But it didn't die. It howled. For a long time. I went back and shot it again and again. I had to stop the noise. I had to stop her."

Dov held his face in his hands. He too was writhing now on the hard sand.

"I took my rifle and I hit her. Hard. With the butt. I don't know how many times. Until she stopped. Her eyes were wide and her mouth open. Like she was surprised. That's how she looked. And then all this blood came gushing out..."

Dov stopped.

Reuben glanced back at him once, then stared at the far off mountains. When he looked down again at Dov, he could see he was shaking, taking great gulps of air. Reuben could only watch him. There was nothing left to say.

After a while, Dov spoke, startling Reuben. His tone was almost conversational. Reuben realised he was talking about the Bedouin village again.

"Are those shacks worth defending, rebuilding, fighting for? Year in and year out?"

They both said nothing.

"It's not the shacks they are fighting for," Dov answered himself. "You got to hand it to them."

He nodded again.

"Whatever it is they are fighting for, they're not giving up."

He removed his hands from his face and grimaced at the sudden beat of the sun's harsh glare. He stayed like that, unmoving. Reuben watched him, lying on his back in the sand. He knew he had to say something, wished he could think of anything. He opened his mouth, and closed it again. He could reach out, touch Dov, squeeze his arm or maybe stroke his head? But Reuben's hand stayed where it was.

"We have to go, leave this place." Reuben spoke at last.

Then he realised that Dov had said the same words to him, only days before, although now it felt like another time. They stayed where they were.

A short while later, he tried again. "We can't say here." Once again he felt certain he had said exactly those words to Dov, sometime during their hike.

"What now? Where are we heading?" Dov replied.

Reuben felt the hair on his neck rise. He stared at Dov, still lying prone beneath the beating sun. His son was repeating his own words.

After a while Reuben rose, waited for Dov to get to his feet. This time Reuben took the rucksack. It was heavier than he had expected. He wondered how Dov had carried this weight for such a long distance.

"Let's go," he said. "Let's find that bus stop."

"It's a big bus terminus. Serves most routes," Dov said after a long while, returning to the conversation as if it hadn't stopped. "You can get back to Haifa without having to make a change."

Reuben stared at him in surprise. How did Dov know that he was living in Haifa? And would he come home with him? Or would he head off on his own? And where would that be?

Reuben wanted answers but he knew he wasn't going to get them. He guessed that Dov didn't know himself. Not right now. They would hike to the bus station, and when they arrived they would decide on the next step.

Familiar exasperation with his son made him smile. He nodded. Dov gave a small nod in reply. Then he smiled briefly at his father. It was that same strange smile, the corners of his mouth upturned. Reuben found it disturbing. For a frozen second he looked at his son's face

and didn't know him at all. They walked on in silence, side by side. After some moments Reuben glanced again at Dov. The odd smile was gone. He looked back at his son once more. Dov was staring ahead and his profile was familiar again. Reuben watched as a drop of sweat rolled down his neck.

Self-Reflective Essay

Writing the Difficult Things

Introduction

What an extraordinary experience the writing of this thesis has been. I set out with a fairly modest aim. After forty years of journalism, I wanted to see if I could really write. Journalism is formulaic, whereas what I understand as writing is creative. Second to my husband, my children, and my dogs, reading fiction is probably what I love best. Journalism, which I use for purposes of comparison because it is something I know, keeps you informed, aware, and grounded. Fiction, by contrast, allows you to fly. I wanted to find out if I could take off on wings of words and fly. Having reached the end of this project my honest answer is that I don't know if I ever left the ground. What I do know is that in this process I travelled a long, challenging, and ultimately satisfying road.

Creative writing takes one from the conceptualisation of a story through all its myriad mutations to a final product, which in the end may be unrecognisable. It will almost certainly be different from the initial idea. You meet characters and even though you have created them you go through the process of getting to know them as they change over the course of the story. The writer has to be well informed about the context in which the story is set, especially when embarking on writing fiction that is based on fact as I have done. Ideally the world in which the story is set should become as familiar as the world that the writer inhabits. Conventional wisdom says write what you know, but surely creative writing must also take you beyond that to unknown worlds. Ultimately the writer has to create those worlds in a way that is reliably convincing and at the same unpredictably exciting enough to hold the reader. To accomplish this, the tools at the writer's disposal are words, and the task of the creative writer is to craft them in a way that accomplishes the purpose of story-telling.

Why I wrote this story - theme and context

At the centre of this project is the theme of homelessness. Locked into all forms of displacement from home is loss. Individuals are driven from their comfort zones towards the margins of humankind and sometimes beyond. I chose to write a story about a theme that is generic to the human experience, but at the same time deeply personal.

Lost on the Way Home is a story about four men. Reuben is the primary character. His grandfather, Sam, has already passed away by the time the story takes place, but he remains an important part of it. Reuben's son, Dov, and their relationship, serves as the hook upon which the tale of exile hangs. Finally there is Haroom, a young man whom Reuben befriends, whose role is both to stand in for his son as well as to serve as his counterfoil. Despite their differences, all four men share the experience of being driven from their "homes", or the communities or places from which they originate, and it is in their individual relationships that the themes of home and homelessness develops. The story is set in South Africa and Israel/Palestine where each finds himself estranged and marginalised and, in different ways, seeking a space that could become or serve as their home.

I chose this theme for two reasons and I aim in this essay, just as in my writing project, to demonstrate that the two objectives are in fact inseparable.

Firstly, in this project I wanted to make a political point that is very important to me. I set out to write a story that demonstrates the similarities between apartheid South Africa and Israel and its Occupied Territories. My novella aims to demonstrate just some of the consequences of racial hatred, specifically the exile, loss, pain, and homelessness that it creates.

Secondly, writing this novella forced me to face questions that I have been asking since I was old enough to ask questions about myself and my identity: What does it mean to be Jewish? Am I Jewish or South African? Why do South African Jews regard Israel as their homeland? This in time led to questions like: How can people who have known the worst of racism embrace it, or at least tolerate it? Have we learned nothing from our own painful past? These questions are the same as those that Reuben, Dov, Sam, and Haroom encounter, each in their own different ways. It is my experience that how they are answered informs us of who we are, and that this in turn determines the way in which we regard and treat others.

Underlying my story, but barely mentioned in it, is the Holocaust, one of history's worst examples of people being driven away from their homes, and ultimately to their deaths. It is a narrative shared by all Jewish people and, subsequently, by Palestinians too. There is a massive body of Holocaust literature, but what I have tried to do in this project is to demonstrate how two tragic conflicting narratives are best understood if they are treated as one. In this protracted chapter of history, two nations are in turn perceived as the "other" and punished cruelly by being dispossessed of everything that they have and everything that they are. Most writing about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is told from one or other viewpoint,

and based on assumptions that deny the existence of the other's perspective. But I believe it is a single story of a shared pain.

It has always horrified me that people who have encountered the worst of human nature at first hand, and survived, can repeat the experience from a position of power, with the result that the victim in time becomes the perpetrator, the cycle of violent discrimination is maintained, and apparently nothing has been learned from history. This is not an abstract observation. It is a very real contradiction that I experience. As a Jew, I was brought up on stories of brutal "race"-based victimisation that aimed to exterminate my forebears. One of the dictums upon which my Jewish identity was premised was "never again". The establishment of the state of Israel ensured that never again would Jewish people be subjected to blatantly racist legislation. Never again would my people be dispossessed of their property and businesses, driven from their homes, expected to step off the sidewalk to make way for their oppressors. Never again would they be forced into exile or herded into death camps.

Yet as soon as I was old enough to become aware of my surroundings, I observed apartheid legislation being used against my own countrywomen and men in a disturbingly similar way. I was too young to articulate it, but I grew up constantly wondering how my community of South African Jews could simply absolve themselves of responsibility for the violent racial oppression that was going on around us, and from which we were benefitting. And in time, I also learned that further afield in Israel/Palestine – which as a Jew is in many ways very close to home - my people had systematically and brutally dispossessed others of their land, their nationhood, their dignity, security, and their human rights. And that they continue to do so. How do thinking people reconcile these situations? More particularly, how do Jewish people, those not driven by a dangerously extremist and reactionary Zionism, come to terms with such contradictions? This is what I explore in *Lost on the Way Home.*

How I wrote this story – writing exercises and techniques

Developing the characters

I started off by identifying the individuals I needed to populate my story. I knew they had to be "real", at least to me. My first exercise therefore involved writing detailed biographies of each character, including those who had a peripheral role in the story. My characters' stories originated in historical circumstances that shaped who they would be in the story. At this stage I focused on creating biographies and detailed life histories for all of them. This material was never intended to be included in the story, but I did need to know

about their pasts and where they came from. My aim was not to elaborate on their characteristics, personalities, or the kind of people they would be. Just as getting to know real people takes time and requires the building of a relationship, I knew I would only become familiar with my characters in the process of telling their stories.

Historical background

Because my fictional characters had to have lives that were as varied and complex as real life inevitably is, I compiled a detailed timeline from 1922 (when the League of Nations placed Palestine under British mandatory rule) until the end of the story in 2007. This is included as an Appendix. (123) I added information to the timeline as my research broadened my knowledge, and I referred to the timeline continuously, revising the story where necessary, so that the fictional aspects were aligned with actual events and developments. I was dealing with historical events that overlapped in my story, and the chronological order of the plot had to be a reliable scaffold upon which I built my characters' fictionalised lives.

Moreover, this was important to me because the subject matter of the story I chose to write about – the Israel/Palestine conflict – is such highly contested terrain that I decided early on in the project that I was committed to ensuring that I could always back up my fictionalised account by referring to reliable factual and historical sources.

Story Physics

When it came to characterisation and plot, I found Larry Brooks's article, "Story Physics: Harnessing the Underlying Forces of Storytelling," useful in creating my characters and their interactions (22). He focuses on the successful characterisation of the chief protagonist and argues that he or she must be engaged in a challenge or conflict of some kind, which they overcome or resolve, despite the difficulties in their way. He writes: "An effective story is about a hero with a problem and a resultant quest, with something at stake, with opposition standing in the way" (22). I do think Brooks was focusing on a particular kind of hero, and disregarding anti-heroes who fail in their quest but who are nevertheless effective protagonists. But from his approach I learned that a good story is not about an idea, a situation or a theme. It has to be about something that happens (66). His second key point is that we must empathise with the protagonist. We don't necessarily have to like him or her but we must care about what happens to them in the end. In *Lost on the way Home* Reuben, the chief protagonist, does not leave you feeling inspired or uplifted. He does not win battles against enemies. Instead his real enemy is within himself and the best he can do is make

peace with it. My hope is that by the end of the story we have identified and empathised with Reuben enough to care about how his relationship with himself, and with his son, are resolved, even while the story leaves that open.

Development of characters

In the course of my work on the novella my characters developed spontaneously and I got to know them as I developed them, but their roles in the story changed in accordance with decisions I made in the writing. Sam, for example, was initially going to have a larger role which included his experience of fleeing Nazi Germany and setting up home in South Africa. In the end, however, I decided that the best way to tell Sam's story was to refer to it indirectly through the telling of Reuben's and Dov's stories.

My original plan also included Amy, a sixty-something, Jewish woman from Cape Town who had her own story of homelessness. Amy was intended to play a small role in the story, but a very important one as she would provide the backdrop to Reuben's life. An adoring aunt, she had known him since birth and therefore knew more about him that he himself did, providing a narrative on Reuben's life about which he was unaware, and which he did not necessarily understand. Amy's other purpose was to illustrate aspects of the Jewish culture of that time and place, and to give the reader insight into and understanding of the psycho-social milieu in which the characters lived.

My aim was to experiment with writing Amy's story in the first person, while the rest of the project was written from Reuben's point of view in the third person omniscient. About three-quarters of the way into the project my supervisor in her gentle but firm way convinced me that I was not an experienced enough writer – and this was not a long enough thesis – to shift perspectives in this way, and the result was confusing. I briefly considered alternative ways of incorporating Amy into my story but in the end very easily decided to delete Amy altogether. I had written numerous pages of Amy's story and found, having done so, that I was easily able to relinquish her. I realised (or rather my supervisor did and enabled me to find that out for myself) that I had been diverted into another story, closer in fact to my own, and that with Amy gone I could return to the story I had intended to tell.

This left me with my four main characters: Sam, Reuben, Dov, and Haroom, each of whom are very different, and who engage with each other in different times, spaces, and ways, but who shared a common experience of alienation and periods of homelessness. They all bear the marks of isolation and marginalisation from their communities. It is in their

individual relationships with each other that this commonality is expressed, and I use imagery and dialogue to illustrate this.

Recurrent Images

Dov is introduced as a small boy sleeping curled up in a tight ball (7), leaving his father worrying if he is all right. The same image of a foetal Dov is repeated after his breakdown in the desert (80), which also causes his father much distress. In this way the reader knows that Dov, the macho, strutting, and uncaring Israeli soldier, is throughout his life, in reality deeply vulnerable.

I have tried to convey the complexity of the father-son relationship throughout the story through their body language, especially through the use of their eyes. For example, when they arrive in Israel, Dov looks up to Reuben for comfort, but Reuben avoids eye contact (7). Again later Reuben observes that as Dov grows to manhood he avoids looking at him in the eye (29), and Dov does so again when he confesses to brutalising the Palestinian woman (102).

Reuben's relationship with his grandfather, Sam, is mirrored in many ways in his relationship with his son, Dov, (while Reuben and Dov experience Sam very differently). The room that Reuben shares with Sam is bleak, bare, and above all very silent. This matches the apartment in Tel Aviv in which Reuben sets up home with Dov. I draw attention to these similarities, for example, by using in both cases the image of a bare wooden table at which they eat in silence, seated at opposite ends (8, 28). I reinforce this with my description of Sam and Reuben at festive family mealtimes where they remain upright and uncomfortable, seated at the table while the many relatives relax, squashed together in comfortable sofas (8).

Imagery associated with seating is also used to illustrate other relationships. For example, in Reuben's encounter with the very odd and distant Meir in the kibbutz dining hall they are seated alone at the same table but too far from each other to shake hands (14).

In capturing the differences between Reuben's relationships with his son and with Haroom, which I consider in more detail below, I also use the seating imagery. Throughout, Reuben and Dov are formally seated, usually at a distance, even separated by a table. In contrast, when Reuben engages with Haroom they are never seated formally at a table, but instead lounge on comfortable pouffes, usually quite close to each other, unless they are discussing issues of contestation. This is one of the ways in which I illustrate the differences between the two younger men, as well as the very different relationship each of them has

with Reuben, who is father to both in a very different "father-son" relationship. Haroom in some ways replaces Dov after father and son have parted company.

Father-son relationships

I experiment with exploring the differences in these two relationships by making Dov and Haroom take turns in being present in Reuben's life. The two young men never encounter each other. In this way I can illustrate their vastly contrasting engagements with Reuben. I try to avoid making Dov and Haroom one-dimensional, but when it comes to their behaviour towards Reuben they behave consistently in character, relating to him in sharply contrasting, even opposite, ways. Dov is rude, cheeky, patronising, and sometimes aggressive towards his father, while Haroom is gentle, polite, and makes every effort to constrain his anger towards this father figure who is at the same time an Israeli and former Zionist with whom one would expect him to be very angry.

For example, one of the ways in which I illustrate the differences in their engagement is in the way they deal with the issue of truth. Dov implores his father to tell him the truth about his great-grandfather and their shared family roots (81), making Reuben uncomfortable because it will raise pain from their pasts. Haroom instead tells Reuben to abandon his search for the truth (about the Intifada and the aggressive Israeli response to it), warning him that the truth will hurt (50). The pursuit of reconciliation is treated in the same way when it emerges in their contrasting dialogues. Dov is adamant that Jews will never be willing to forget and therefore cannot ever forgive (84), but Haroom, while sceptical, is informed about, and interested in, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, looking to it with some hope (50).

And then, of course, there are the political dynamics. I have drawn on political ideology throughout the novella to elaborate on the ebb and flow of relationships. Grandfather Sam's only attempt to reach out to Reuben is through sharing, as best he can, his commitment to socialism. But Sam's accent makes some of his statements incomprehensible (9) and Reuben doesn't even remember much of what he said when years later Dov appeals to him to "Tell me about Sam". Reuben also tried communicating via a shared political interest in his short and ill-fated marriage, but that too was not successful and did not last. And although he tries to follow in Sam's political footsteps, that also does not work for him, and leaves him wondering about the veracity of what he had learned from Sam (14). This is a prelude to the dramatic political clashes between Reuben and Dov, and contrasts with

Reuben's relationship with Haroom in that it is their political differences that draw them closer together and provide something important that they can share.

However, while I have illustrated the differences in the relationships between Dov/Haroom and Reuben, there is one essential area of commonality. While all that they apparently have in common is their age, importantly what the young men both unknowingly do is to become Reuben's carer, despite him being the father. At different times they both look after Reuben, the "father", when Reuben is unable to take care of them, his "sons". Reuben is only very vaguely aware of his inability to live up to the role of father. The closest he comes to articulating this is in a flash of insight when studying his son for the first time as an adult (73-74), but that awareness passes without him being able to acknowledge it. In reality he is often "childlike" in relation to the two "sons". This is an important theme because it shows Reuben' own vulnerability and neediness and that while he was "father" to both of them, he was also very much in need of a father himself, as he desperately searches for a home. What is important is that the three men share the absence of a father, a figure central to, and sometimes even symbolic of, a home. In short, all three men share and expose their vulnerabilities through their common homelessness, which is in part the result of their shared absence of a father.

I will attempt to illustrate how I frequently show both younger men playing the role of Reuben's father and carer. Most obviously this emerges near the end of the desert hike. As it becomes dark, Dov instructs his father to hold his hand so that he, Reuben, does not get lost (89). Later, Dov leads Reuben to the place he has found for them to take shelter in the Bedouin camp, and Reuben hangs on to his hand (93). There is evidence of this role-swapping throughout the story. Dov agrees to the hike, as he did when he was a boy, and even allows his father to take charge to some extent, but then he belittles him for forgetting to pack a map and for wearing inappropriate hiking boots (75). During the hike Reuben wants to take his son to safety, but it is Dov who knows the desert and has to take charge and lead the way (75 & 101). This is less obvious, but still apparent in Reuben's interaction with Haroom upon whom he depends not only for company and coffee but mainly for help in making sense of his conflicted unease as an Israeli. Twice he asks Haroom to take him "home" to Haroom's family in Ramallah, even though he knows it is inappropriate and is uncomfortable doing so (56 & 57).

These are complex relationships that are explored through their contrasts, but they also share some commonalities. I have used images of silence, darkness, and non-recognisability to acknowledge this. When Reuben's engagements with Haroom become

complex and uncomfortable, this almost always takes place in the dark and they are unable to see each other clearly (47-48). Similarly Reuben does not recognise Dov when they are reunited, and he wonders if Dov recognises him (70). I also chose to end the story with this technique (104). Reuben glances at his son and does not recognise him. It is only at a second glance that Dov is once again familiar, though even then he is available only in profile. I purposefully ended the story inconclusively in this way because theirs is a relationship that can never be clarified or resolved, and a nod and fleeting glance of recognition is all that Reuben can hope for.

Challenges of writing this story

Writing historical fiction

The first question I found myself asking in approaching this project was: Why take fact and turn it into fiction? This led me to a second question: Does the creative writer write to escape from the world or to delve deeper into it? The answer lay in my response to a third question. Why do I read fiction? To me, what I consider good fiction allows me to learn more about myself and the space that I inhabit. Therefore the task I set myself was to delve deeply into the subject of Palestine/Israel in order to learn more about myself and my world. But that turned out to be more difficult than I imagined, and in facing the challenges it posed I had to experiment and explore new territory.

I started out under the impression that I was well informed about the Palestinian struggle. Nothing could have been further from the truth. I undertook considerable research, initially simply to get a sense of the place. Instead I found that the history, essays, and fiction that I read and the movies and documentaries that I watched taught me that I actually knew very little. I was deeply shocked at what I witnessed and learned through these sources. The conditions under which Palestinians live were, and are far, far worse than I had known. I pushed on, through territory so unfamiliar, both geographically and in a literary sense, and it was much harder going than I expected. My writing could never reflect the depth of horror I learned about, and I can only conclude that this was one of the many things I discovered through this project, and for that I have many writers and film-makers to thank.

A major writing challenge I faced in working with this material was conveying political content without becoming didactic. After a while I observed that a trick to achieving this lay in the pace of the story-telling, and that it was more successful when my story slowed down sufficiently to reflect small and apparently irrelevant detail. For example, when Reuben

sits down to read newspapers on a "three-legged stool that he found beneath the table"(23), I would like to think I convey something about the room in which he was sitting rather than merely considering the content he was reading. The newspapers that he discovered had been tossed away into an old box in no particular order and left to yellow with age. By noting this I hope I convey the disinterest of those around him in the information that those newspapers contained, information which to Reuben became life-changing. As a further strategy to avoid didacticism I found that dialogue inevitably slows down the pace of a story and that helped me to show not tell.

Pacing a story gives the words time and space to create the narrative. In this regard I think my weakest chapter was chapter five in which I feel that I sped through almost the entire father-son relationship and experience of estrangement, which is critical to the story. I could possibly have done this better if I had confined myself to a shorter story, or been permitted to use more words.

I did a lot of research into post-1948 Palestine to convey the sense of a country that had undergone multiple political and economic turning points, and it was a challenge to convey this information without allowing my creative writing to become a political textbook. For example, Reuben arrives in Israel in 1985. My research showed that Israel at this time, after the right-wing Likud party came to power, reflected a subtly changed political landscape. It was central to the story that Reuben is unaware of this, so I couldn't use my character to convey this information.

I also felt particularly handicapped in that, never having been to Palestine-Israel, I did not know the landscape, the manner of dress and speech, the small and "irrelevant" details and overall layout of places. I considered visiting Israel, but this wasn't really a viable option.

Overall, the major challenge I faced in writing *Lost on the way Home* involved what may be the most important lesson to be learned in producing creative writing, and that is the often-repeated challenge of "showing not telling". It was difficult to do this while fictionalising politics and history, in part I suspect because, as I have declared, there were political points I wanted to make in my story.

Lessons from historical fiction

This project introduced me to some useful debate about historical fiction, and the extent to which fiction may take liberties with fact. While my story might not fit some definitions of historical fiction insofar as much of it is contemporary or set in the recent past, to the extent that the project locates my characters in an historical context, and acknowledges

that their stories would be meaningless if they were ahistorical, I found reading on this genre very helpful.

By making my characters agents of their own stories, responsible for what precedes their experiences and what follows them, and inseparable from their political implications, I understood my genre to be close to what Georg Lukacs terms the historical novel, and therefore chose to use this school of thought as a central reference point for my own writing (1962). So I see *Lost on the Way Home* in terms of commentary about a specific time and place. In this context the term "historical fiction" has political significance, what Lukacs refers to as the moment when "men comprehend their own existence as something historically conditioned, for them to see in history something which deeply affects their daily lives and immediately concerns them." (1962 24)

I also found very useful Scott Dalton's nuanced definition of historical fiction as "a literary work or category whose content is produced by the imagination and based on or concerned with events in history". (2016 2) He goes on to say that the historian and the historical fiction writer are both duty-bound to approximate the truth, but the former considers the events focusing on the truth, while "the fiction writer focuses on the persons -- the characters, if you will -- involved in those events... The historian, at the most basic level, seeks to answer the question 'What happened?'" (2).

Also very useful was Philip Schlesinger's review of W G Sebald's literary narrative, *Austerlitz,* in which he introduces the notion of the "unreliable narrator" (54). This allows fiction to enter "territory where the reader's experience may be both 'literary' and 'non-literary' at one and the same time" (Schlesinger 49). Literary conventions are boldly transgressed in this novel of a narrator whose personal reminiscences provide an alternative historical account of his own life. Thus *Austerlitz* takes the reader far further than the literal reality of the dispossessed and exiled. I noted that Sebald depicts this layered and nuanced world of homelessness as a bleak choice between forgetting and painfully recovering memory that is in itself even more self-destructive. To me this raises questions about those people – and there are many – who achieve success in their adopted home while failing to establish a new identity and who are therefore doomed to forever live "between nations, cultures and languages…in a state of perpetual liminality" (Schlesinger 62). The significance of this for generational displacement is what I have reflected on in *Lost on the Way Home* and I attempt to capture and elaborate on this terribly sad contradiction.

Lessons from related fiction

Among the more than twenty novels and autobiographies that I read about Palestine/Israel, I found several books especially useful in writing a version of historical fiction. *Letters of Stone* (2016), by Steven Robins, is an account of Jews who were unable to escape Nazism in time and how a disbelieving Jewish community was caught unprepared for the brutality of genocide. Relevant fiction on Palestine includes *Mornings in Jenin* (2010) by Susan Abulhawa, and *The Lemon Tree* (2006) by Sandy Tolan, two examples of a growing body of literature that tells a story of brutal Palestinian displacement which for many years was not written about.

I also found it very useful to draw on literary work about home and displacement from entirely different settings, for example *Goodbye Sarajevo* (2012), which is a true story of two sisters who survived the siege of that city. Chapters alternate between their very different experiences – one as a refugee in Croatia, the other trapped in the city at war. I was also very moved by *What is the What* (2006), which is about the so-called lost boys of Sudan, and *My Ear at his Heart: Reading my Father* (2004). This last is about immigration from India to England at the time of partition. It raises tangled notions of homelessness for a man whose home becomes Pakistan, a place entirely foreign and unknown to him. Having grown up in India under British rule, Britain remains the closest to what he can call "home", although it in turn regards him as an outsider. Through these authors I derived a better sense of how historical events relate to questions of homelessness.

Finally, it must be said that despite the experience of engaging in this way with an extensive body of fiction and non-fiction, and both literary and audio-visual material, and the empowering experience of working with a very instructive supervisor whose strength lay in her ability to "show don't tell", I feel that I would have benefitted from participating in Creative Writing course work.

To have completed this project to the best of my ability I would have needed to learn more about the practice of writing, the different styles and techniques, as well as how to critique it, and to develop my appreciation of high-quality writing, and be introduced to critical thinking in literary studies. I now think it was presumptuous of me to attempt to write a masters in Creative Writing without a post-graduate background in the field.

Conclusion

Times literary critic Lev Grossman writes of reading fiction:

> There's more than escapism going on here. Why do we seek out these hard places for our fantasy vacations? Because on some level, we recognise and claim those disasters as our own. We seek out hard places precisely because our lives are hard [and we] re-encounter those problems in transfigured form, in an unfamiliar guise, one that helps you understand them more completely, and feel them more deeply. You don't read [fiction] to escape your problems, you read it to find a new way to come to terms with them." (2012 web)

This story could have been written as a news report or an academic article, but I like to think that the form I have chosen added some value. Creative writing is more complex, textured, nuanced, and ultimately more meaningful to the reader who is able to identify with the characters and in that way engage more satisfactorily with the content.

I hope that in my writing project I have been able to contribute to telling a story of Israel / Palestine in a way that helps us understand the pain and complexity of this shameful episode in human history and enrich our experience by bringing it closer. Completing this thesis has enabled me to look further and deeper into a part of the world which may be far from my home but is in so many ways very much part of it. The experience has raised new questions, very personal ones, and given me a context for, and greater understanding of, the contradictions with which I have always lived. Writing the novella has not resolved these very personal issues, or enlightened me in a way that enables me to escape them. To quote Grossman, reading fiction provides "a new way to come to terms" with matters close to you and allows you to "encounter those problems in transfigured form" to provide a deeper understanding of them. I believe that is true, and I have learned that it is even more true of the personal and powerful experience of writing about them. Through this project I have learned that writing the difficult things provides a wisdom that helps you live with them.

Finally, my sincere thanks to my supervisor, Professor Julia Martin, who generously shared with me with her extensive experience, thereby empowering me with knowledge and new skills to find understanding, and the peace that it brings, through writing.

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Appendix

Timeline

Events in story	Date	Political & social events
Sam Abramovski is born	1910	
	1922	The League of Nations places Palestine under British mandatory rule.
	1930	Arabs demand Palestine Day and call for General Strike
Sam Abramovski arrives in SA on one of the last boats of European Jews permitted into South Africa. He is 25. He leaves his parents and older sister in Germany and settles in Johannesburg. His parents had come from Russia and were Bundists who left Russia at the turn of the century.	1936	In SA, Nazism and Anti-Semitism is rife, Immigration Amendment Act passed that year followed by Aliens Act passed in 1937, barring further Jewish immigration.
Haroom's grandfather is born.	1936	The start of the 1936-1939 Arab General Strike which leads to an uprising demanding Arab independence and an end to Jewish occupation.
Sam shortens his surname to Abrams, marries Sarah Lewin, only daughter of a comfortable businessman.	1938	There is a lot of anti-Semitism in SA, at the same time as a lot of opportunity. Sam struggles to find work, lives off money sent by his family via family friends in Switzerland.
Haroom's grandmother is born	1938	Palestine is still under British occupation. The Arab uprising is underway.
	1939	Brutal crushing of Arab uprising by British army and Palestine Police Force indicates British opposition to Arabs to come later
Sam and Sarah have one daughter, Anna.	1939	Second World War starts.
Sam, Sarah and Anna cannot make a living in JHB and when financial support from Germany dries up completely Sam has to leave them with Sarah's parents in a flat in Yeoville, JHB. He opens a shop near the township of Evaton, near Vanderbijlpark, TVL. Anna is one year old.	1940	Townships are being built to house black workers who are moving to the then Witwatersrand.
Sam learns his parents, sister and brother-in-law died in a concentration camp.	1945	Post-war truth emerging about Holocaust deeply affects the shared consciousness of the Jewish community in JHB.

Anna, 9, and Sarah are firmly integrated into an increasingly wealthy and complacent JHB Jewish community.	1948	The Nats come to power in SA.
Haroon Zeidani's grandparents are driven out of their family home in Jaffa and become refugees. His grandparents are young children at the time, 10 and 12 years old respectively.	1948	The State of Israel declared. Called al Nabka (or Catastrophe) by Palestinians. More than three quarters of Palestinians living in what becomes the new state of Israel are driven out of their homes, many into refugee camps.
After Haroom's grandparents are forced out of Jaffa, Haroon's grandmother, now aged 11, moves back to East Jerusalem, then under Jordanian rule. Haroom's grandfather, aged 13, moves with his parents, Haroom's great-grandparents, to Ramallah, then under Jordanian rule.	1948	The Israeli army takes control of Jaffa reducing its population of 70,000 to 4,000
	1948	Members of the Arab League – Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Transjordan, the Holy War Army and the Arab Liberation Army - marched into what had the previous day ceased to be the British Mandate for Palestine. The All-Palestine Government assembled in the Egyptian-controlled Gaza Strip and was recognized by all members of the Arab League except Jordan.
	1949	Arab states agree to peace. Fedayeen continue armed raids into Israel for at least another 10 years. There are many deaths on both sides.
Haroom's grandparents marry and settle in Ramallah, then under Jordanian rule	1955	About 80% of Palestine now falls under Israel.
Anna falls pregnant. She is not yet 19. Oi, the shame!	1958	The Nationalist Party is now firmly entrenched in power. SA Jewish community deeply suspicion of neo-Nazi Nationalist Party, and sympathetic with black South Africans. At the same time they are afraid of being the scapegoats as they were in Germany
Reuben is born to Anna. Sam travels weekly to JHB to visit his daughter Anna, Sarah and new grandson, Reuben.	1959	
	1959	Fatah formed by Arafat to continue the armed insurrection
Haroom's dad, Mahomed, is born	1962	He is born in Ramallah which is under Jordanian rule
Haroom's mother, Aisha, is born	1963	Her mother was from East Jerusalem, which was also under Jordanian rule at the time.

	1963	The PLO is formed
Reuben, now seven, is allowed to stay up late to hear radio broadcasts on the progress of the Six-Day War with his mother and grandmother.	1967	Six-Day War in Israel has a strong impact on Jewish psyche, and creates a new pride in Israel among Jews as Israel occupies even more land – including Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights.
Mahomed is 5 and Aisha is 4	1967	Israeli occupies West Bank, East Jerusalem and Ramallah. To Palestinians this start of the Occupation is devastating.
Anna is too young to cope with Reuben, and Sarah too old to look after him so Reuben is sent to live with Sam in the flat above the shop adjacent to Evaton. He is seven years old.	1967	.
Reuben is sent to a Jewish boarding school in JHB for his matric year. There he is introduced to Zionism. In those days it was very closely associated with socialism and this is the political thinking that appeals to Reuben as a result of Sam's influence.	1977	Apartheid SA and apartheid Israel respectively shore up their power.
	1973	Yom Kippur War
	1973	Mass strikes in SA
	1975	Independence is declared in neighbouring former Portuguese colonies
	1976	Soweto riots in SA
	1977	Right-wing Likud party comes to power This is the start of Israel's shift away from socialism to capitalism. Israelis are poor, the economy is weak and Israel's left-wing policies take a knock, as socialist idealism gives way and industry becomes privatised.
Reuben goes to university. There he is introduced to some radical political ideas, and to a young fellow student, Emma. New political movements are emerging in SA, including at universities.	1978	
	1978	Israelis, with Christian South Lebanon Army, start a drive against PLO camps in Lebanon.
	1978	About a million Palestinians are living under military occupation. The Israeli settlers start moving into the Occupied Territories, resulting in clashes between Jews and Palestinians. Opposition emerges in Israel and Peace Now is formed.
Reuben and Emma get married. Emma gets very involved in the emerging trade	1979	

union movement and related underground politics, which she keeps from Reuben.		
Dov is born	1979	
Haroon's father, Mohamed, marries, Aisha.	1979	
Haroon is born	1979	Growing tension in Israel/Palestine.
Sam is now in his 70s and starting to struggle to look after himself. He moves into the flat in Yeoville, JHB.	1979	
Reuben is now 22. Emma is very involved in underground trade union activity. Reuben hates the lifestyle, and becomes estranged from Emma. He takes Dov, barely 3 years old, and moves into the flat he grew up in.	1982	
	1982	Sabra and Shatilla massacre in Lebanon
Reuben and Dov leave South Africa and go to a Kibbutz. Reuben wants to escape from what he sees happening in SA under apartheid.	1985	South Africa in an uproar, with a state of emergency, detentions, and bannings.
Reuben's dream of Zionist socialism is slowly crushed. He leaves the kibbutz, taking Dov, now 7, to a small flat in Tel Aviv.	1986	Israeli resistance movements are emerging along with growing Jewish support for Palestinians and resistance to the right-wing Israeli state.
Sam dies in Johannesburg	1987	
	1987	The first Intifada breaks out in Jabalia refugee camp in Gaza, and spreads to refugee camps in the West Bank.
	1987	Hamas is formed, and is the radical side of the Muslim Brotherhood
	1989	The first attack by Hamas inside Israel takes place
	1990	South Africa unbans political resistance groups, and negotiations start. There is violence in South Africa, it is on the brink of civil war, but negotiations bring hope
	1991	The beginnings of the pass system is imposed on all Palestinians in Israel. This system is intensified over time.
	1991	Middle East peace talks are held in Madrid, sponsored by US and Soviet Union
Haroon is a radical youth of only 12 years old. He runs away to the West Bank and joins the tail end of the Intifada.	1991	
	1992	Labour leader Rabin is in power, marking the start of a brief period of doveish attempts at "reconciliation" by Israel.

	1993	Declaration of Principles is signed in the US. Israel and PLO sign "letters of mutual recognition" paving the way for Palestinian self rule.
.	1994	Baruch Goldstein kills 29 Palestinians at a mosque in Hebron.
	1994	The first suicide bombing happens in Israel in Afula. Eight Israelis are killed.
	1994	The Cairo agreement is signed and the Palestinian Authority established. Palestinian exiles return and Palestinian self rule is introduced in Gaza and Hebron.
	1994	South Africa's first democratic election is held.
	1995	Palestinian Authority's legitimacy becomes questionable.
	1995	PLO and Israel sign the Washington Agreement. Rabin is assassinated by a right-wing settler. PLO leader Ayash is assassinated in Gaza.
	1996	Likud's Netanyahu is elected prime minister. Likud's return to power ends the brief Labour Party govt's efforts at resolution with some Palestinian autonomy, in the face of the expansion of the settler communities.
Dov is in his mid to late-teens. He supports Likud's hard-line response. Reuben is disappointed at the failure of the Oslo agreements and shocked at Israel's right-wing and militarist politics.	1996	.
Dov finishes school. He is almost 18 and starts his compulsory military training.	1997	Suicide bombings continue in Israel, at the rate of about five a year. Israel responds with assassinations, arrests, detentions, and sealing off the self ruled areas of Palestine like Gaza, repeatedly preventing Gazans from working in Israel, which is their only source of income, or means of seeking medical and other services.
Dov is caught up in the Israeli regular military reserve, and gets fully caught up in the Israeli hostility.	2000	The Oslo accord (1993) comes to nought and in 2000 the second Intifada breaks out.
Haroon gets a bursary and moves to the US to study. He is 21.	2000	
Reuben is horrified by the Second Intifada and the Israeli reaction to it. Dov supports Israel. They become increasingly estranged.	2001	There are knifings by Palestinians in Israel. Israelis respond with shootings. There are deaths on both sides. Many more Palestinians die than Israelis.

Dov is in his very early 20s and completes his compulsory military training	2001	Suicide attacks by Hamas reach a peak, with more than 30 attacks in Israel per year. The wall is being built around the West Bank and Gaza, and Palestinian villages are under siege.
Reuben and Dov clash so strongly over IDF's response to the Intifada that they part company. Dov moves into his own flat. He is 22. Reuben moves to Haifa where society is more diverse, and a little more tolerant.	2002	The Second Intifada is underway. There is serious violence and oppression in Israel/Palestine. Hamas attacks in Israel are at a peak.
Haroon returns to Israel/Palestine. He gets a job and moves into a block of flats in Haifa where he meets his neighbour, Reuben. He is 25.	2004	The Second Intifada is coming to an end.
Haroon becomes something of a political mentor to Reuben who is floundering on the margins of Israeli society, dabbling in the civil society organisations that oppose Israel's actions.	2004	
Dov, in his late 20s, has been serving regularly in the army for almost a decade, engaged in brutal military action in the Occupied Territories. He starts falling apart, which culminates in some kind of post-traumatic stress disorder and he goes AWOL from the army.	2007	The Israeli occupation is mounting in militancy. There are horror stories from the Occupied Territories. The settler movement is growing and, illegally taking over more and more of the Occupied Territories which were intended to form the future independent Palestinian state. The two-state solution becomes a sham.
Dov makes contact with his father for help.	2007	
Reuben and Dov are re reunited.	2007	