

SHELTER

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THERE WAS ANOTHER CRASH ABOVE THEIR HEADS AND SOMEONE SAID, “That one sounded close.” The other neighbours nodded in agreement, though most of them soon bent towards their phones again, eyes and noses illuminated in little glows of light. Trying to get reception, to text their families or check the headlines. Keren stood close to the wall, pinching the top of her towel closed, scanning the floor for cockroaches. The neighbour from flat 3 wrapped her dog’s lead round and round her wrist as she rambled about mobs in Jaffa, cars burning in Lod. She didn’t direct this information at anyone in particular. Her eyes flitted about, searching for a target. She was someone, Keren could tell, who dealt with stress by talking. The last thing Keren wanted was to get sucked into that conversation, be warned how she shouldn’t go outside because of Arabs with knives. Number 3 was probably the type who crossed the road to avoid building sites with construction workers from the West Bank. Keren kept her body turned away. At least it was dark enough that from across the shelter, Number 3 wouldn’t be able to catch her eyes.

There was another deep boom above them and as everyone’s eyes flicked towards the ceiling, Keren felt something cold and oily slide through her stomach.

“How many was that?” a man said, and a debate began on whether it was two or four rockets this time, whether they had been intercepted and the explosions were falling shrapnel, or if they had

actually landed close by. The man had a sleeping baby draped over his shoulder. He was wearing nothing but black boxers, tight on his thighs, his feet bare on the stone floor. He was always naked, or near enough—he took the rubbish out in his underwear, dark hair curling around his bellybutton. Ninety seconds was long enough to throw some clothes on, or at least slide into flip flops. He lived on the second floor, probably in flat 5. She'd seen him and his wife lugging their buggy up the stairs. Keren was in a towel but she lived two floors above them. She hadn't expected a siren and she had jumped out of the shower, not even stopping for her phone. Now, her hair dripped cold trails down her back.

As the neighbours settled into their debate, the man standing next to her said, "Is ten minutes up, yet?"

He didn't turn to face her, but he spoke quietly and she supposed his question was directed at her. His dog licked her toes. Keren said, "Not yet."

He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. They reflected the light from his phone. "What a mess," he said. He had a wedding band on his finger and Keren vaguely remembered his wife, wild hair covered with colourful headbands, one ear pod always stuck in her ear as she talked and gesticulated into the air. She wasn't in the shelter. He said, "I've seen you with your trolley. You live alone?"

"That's right." She felt a flash of embarrassment. She was stubborn in getting her weekly shop from the Carmel market, filling a carrier with fruit and vegetables and bussing it all the way back to Tel Aviv's Old North. The carrier wheels made little clicks as she hauled it up the four flights of stairs to her flat. She made the trip weekly, even now she earned enough and could have saved herself the effort. She often did things out of habit for reasons she wasn't sure of.

He said, "Don't be nervous."

He gestured to her feet, toes curled into her flip flops. How he noticed that in the dark, she wasn't sure. Her wet rope of hair was forming a damp patch on the back of her towel. She wanted to wring out her hair and flip it over her shoulder but was afraid her towel would slip. She imagined it happening—flashing a room full of strangers—everyone more interested in her embarrassment than the rockets but pretending not to notice her scrambling to pull up her towel. Someone making an awkward joke (well, that was more eventful than a terror attack) to make her feel better. If Eyal were here and she'd nagged him a bit, he'd have taken off his T-shirt and let her wear it.

Clenching the top of her towel closed, Keren said, "Your dog's slobbering on my feet."

"Cornflakes!" he said, yanking the dog back by its lead. He said, "Maybe she can smell your cream." The thought of him standing so close to her in the dark, referring to the cream on her body whilst his Labrador sniffed at her toes, made her glance at the outline of the sealed shelter door. She wanted to be in bed, where it was just as dark but deathly quiet, not discovering the bomb shelter and getting to know the neighbours. She felt her heart drumming in the base of her neck and closed her eyes. There were three crashes in quick succession and someone gave a gasp so loud it sounded theatrical. Keren jerked back against the wall, her eyes screwing shut.

"I'm at number 8."

She opened her eyes. "Sorry?"

"The flat directly below you. I meant to tell you that I think there's a leak coming from your bathroom. The top of my ceiling is damp."

He hung his glasses on the front of his T-shirt, which was too wide and long and hung off him. He was clean-shaven, his hair cropped short, thinning but not bald. Keren guessed he was

in his late forties, maybe his early fifties. She wondered why he was still in Tel Aviv in this old building, complaining to his young neighbours about damp, instead of somewhere new in the suburbs with a lift and kids and his own private shelter. Number 8 looked straight at her and she thought about how she heard the pipes from his shower at exactly 9:30 every night and she had to turn up the volume on her TV. He said, "Can I come over and look at it?"

"Now?"

"Of course not." A cockroach jerked in and out of the light from someone's phone and the dog, Cornflakes, leapt after it. Number 8 let the lead go slack. "When it's convenient," he said. She nodded. "Great." After a while, the other neighbours headed towards the door, and she realised it must be safe to go back. The shelter stairs were covered with sand and Keren kept one palm on the wall, though it was cold and a little clammy. The other she clenched around her towel. She would have quicker showers in the future. Someone had wedged the building door open with a brick, for anyone passing on the street to run in and find their shelter. Everyone traipsed up the stairs to their flats. They didn't lock their doors, because it would allow them to leave again in a hurry. As Number 8 pushed open his door, he gave her a half salute.

"We'll meet shortly," he said.

In her flat, she changed into pyjamas and called her mum. They had already spoken twice that day—her parents lived in Nahariya and had nothing else to do but watch the news and listen to their rattling air conditioner and quietly panic. Keren flicked on the TV, half listening to her mother lament about her moving to Tel Aviv, where it was expensive and too far away and, a bizarre idea she had taken against, people sat in cafes in the middle of the street. She made noncommittal noises about coming to stay, and when sirens sounded on the news, replaying a recently collapsed building in Ashkelon, she dropped the remote. It clattered onto the coffee

table and the batteries dropped out. Keren imagined staying in her old room, the single bed and mottled floors, the smell of salt from the sea, the wide, empty roundabouts.

“I’ll see how things go,” she said.

It took her a while to fall asleep—to stop scrolling through the news, through Twitter and Facebook—and the next day, she woke up to emails and texts from work, some of her American clients checking she was safe. She typed and retyped a reply, unable to come up with anything truthful, and in the end sent nothing at all. They’d been told to work from home and though it meant she didn’t have to get dressed or spend half an hour deciding on a group food delivery with the others, or avoid Daniel, the CTO, who had a disconcerting habit of materialising behind them all and watching their screens until they noticed him, she felt dread building in her stomach. It was strangely quiet. Her heart beat in the base of her throat. Keren pushed her chair back. Downstairs, a dog barked and when she went onto her balcony, she smelled oil and onions. The Number 5’s, most likely, preparing breakfast. Nordau Boulevard was empty, the fallen leaves from the trees yellow and still on the ground. She wondered whether it was safe to buy a coffee from the stand on Nordau she liked, whose owner played Beyoncé albums on repeat and told Keren, as he nudged a cardboard cup towards her, that her cappuccino was made “with love.” Instead, she made calls to the CTO, whose child kept crawling into his lap and pulling out his ear pod so the connection was lost. He’d slept in his son’s bed, he told her, when they spoke moments later. She was lucky, he said, that she only had to take care of herself.

In the afternoon when there were no rockets, she headed outside. There were more people around now and she circled the side streets around her house, checking for public shelters or doors wedged open like in her building, calculating where she would

run to if there were a siren. When an ambulance sped past, lights flashing, siren blaring, she froze, sweat on her forehead, behind her neck and knees. She forced a deep breath in and out. She hadn't been this jumpy last time, had she? Seven years ago, she'd sat in a bar in Rabin Square with her roommate Natalia, who had moved here from Argentina. When the siren had gone off, Keren took her half pint of beer with her to the public shelter. Natalia clutched her arm so hard, her fingers left marks.

"You get used to it," Keren told her, and she persuaded her back into the bar. Though Natalia was ready to dash home, Keren signalled to the waiter for more drinks. Natalia blew thick smoke into the bar as she gabbled about being on guard in Argentina, about watching her bag but never the sky.

"I'll never get used to this," she said, though later that night Natalia had met her next boyfriend, Omri or Imri, and when he leaned close to talk to her over the music, she had scooped her hair over her bare shoulder, the missiles apparently no longer on her mind.

But now it seemed Keren was less used to it. It could have been that she was older, more serious, living alone on the top floor without an elevator or a roommate to drink wine with. She had a real job she had to wake up for in the morning. As she was walking into her building, another siren began, a long, hollow wail, rising in volume until it was the only thing she could hear. Keren was the first one in the shelter, flicking on her phone's torch in the dark, her bag banging against her hip on its long strap, heart thudding as she clattered down the steps. There were footsteps behind her, the slamming of doors and soon the shelter filled with flashes of light as the neighbours shuffled in. They formed a rough circle in the same positions as they had the night before; Number 5 opposite her, dressed this time, but still barefoot, Number 3 with

her terrier on its lead in the corner, her hand fluttering to her chest. A middle-aged woman in running gear stood catching her breath, sweat collecting in the hollow of her neck. Her breathing rasped over the neighbours' jokes (Do you come here often? Next time, we'll bring beer. Go around the circle and say your name and your favourite chocolate bar. . . .)—and Number 1 from the ground floor, unfolding two chairs he'd brought from his flat. He gestured for the pregnant woman to take one of the chairs. She protested she could stand, before eventually lowering herself into it. The air was cooler in the dark, soothing, after the sticky heat outside. Keren felt something prod against her shins and Number 8 said, "Cornflakes! Leave her alone." To her, he said, "She likes you. Maybe you were a dog in a past life."

"I doubt it. I don't like dogs."

"Don't like dogs? Who doesn't like dogs? They're better than people."

"That's not saying much," she said.

Number 8 nodded in agreement and as the sirens blared, he said, "I thought about being a dog walker, once. You get to walk around all day outside, breathe fresh air."

"More like walk around outside and sweat," she said. "What happened?"

"My wife told me there was no way she was marrying a dog walker. We were about to get engaged. She told me to stick to the day job."

"She's right," she said. She added, "What's the day job?"

"Hairdresser."

Karen glanced at him. He didn't seem the type to spend his days snipping and grooming people's heads, paying such close attention to detail. Everything about him seemed like an afterthought; his loose T-shirts, the cracked screen on his phone, even his way of speaking, the words thrown out like they were a nuisance he was

trying to get rid of. She couldn't picture him in a salon, standing on glossy tiles, reflected over and over in full length mirrors. More likely, he had one of those hole-in-the-wall barber shops that still gave a wet shave. The sirens stopped and they waited in silence for what came next.

"I hate my job," Keren blurted, to cover it.

"Why's that?"

"I'm in high tech. A small startup. I'm product manager and—"

"—Ah, the golden cage."

"That's not it," she said. "I like working hard. It's all men. I'm the only woman, aside from HR. The CTO told me today I was lucky I lived alone."

"No one wants to live alone," he said. "This man is clearly an idiot. He hates his wife and his kids and never has sex and spends all day complaining and thinking about chips that go into computers." He added, "I'm assuming that's what you make."

"It's not."

"My point is, it's hard, especially now. This man is an ape. How is he running a company?" She felt a small knot loosening inside of her and managed a tight smile. She wanted him to keep talking. "He shouldn't dismiss you. It's lonely. I know."

He rubbed at his eyes behind his glasses and there was a crash so loud the walls shuddered. Keren reached out, searching for something to hold onto and her breaths came fast and shallow. The dogs and some of the neighbours whimpered. The baby slept on, mouth slack.

"It's like being on a roller coaster," Number 8 said. "You wait at the top, you wait and wait. Then, just when you think it's not going to happen, you drop, boom." As if in answer, there was another crash. The pregnant woman clenched her hands over her belly, lifting her head to the ceiling, as if she might be able to see what was happening above them if she looked hard enough. Her husband stood behind her, resting his hands on her shoulders and

her hands lifted from her stomach and joined his. In the dark, they made one shape. Watching them, Keren felt a dull ache in her stomach. Number 8 said, “You don’t talk much.”

“You don’t let me get a word in.”

He laughed. It was a smokers’ laugh, half a thick cough, as if something clogged his throat. “I thought about you last night, on the top floor. What if you don’t wake up?”

“I have enough time to make it down.” In truth, she had changed out of her pyjamas and slept in clothes and a bra, flip flops lined up next to the bed.

“I can knock on your door,” he said. “Next time, I’ll come get you.”

Keren wanted to tell him she would be fine, that there was no way she would sleep through a siren which gave her ninety seconds to run for her life, and just in case, she had even downloaded the app which lit up and howled next to her ear if there were rockets. And she was in his opposite direction to the shelter. But instead she said, “Will you have time?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

There were more crashes and she leaned her back against the wall, the ceiling reverberating with the sound. Number 3 announced it was recommended Israelis south of Netanya sleep in their shelters, though everyone dismissed her—it must be meant for those in the south. Huddled in this space the size of her bedroom, cracks spidered on the concrete floor, she considered bringing down a blow-up mattress. This wasn’t really her life, was it? Cornflakes butted her shins with a wet nose and Keren reached down and sank her hands into the thick fur at her neck.

“What a mess,” Number 8 said.

The sign on her front door said: Keren and Eyal. She had tried to pry it off months ago but stopped when she saw it was damaging the door and the landlord might ask her to pay for it. Eyal would have called her cheap if he knew. Or he would have reminded her where her screwdrivers were and that she knew exactly how to dismantle it, if she really wanted. The news flickered images on mute, burning buildings, black smoke. If Eyal were here, he would have kept the TV on with the volume hiked up, hunched over the sofa with a beer, shooting her looks when she tried to persuade him to watch Netflix. Eyal liked to torture himself. He would think himself into a frenzy then suffer, expecting her to join in.

She was beginning to hate this silence. She wanted to call someone but she didn't want to talk about the war, didn't want her friends to murmur their concern over her alone or have them reluctantly offer her their couches to sleep on, children's toys wedged into the gaps between the cushions. If she went to her parents, she would be nervous driving up the coast, being in exposed areas where falling shrapnel could destroy the car. There were stories about Arabs throwing rocks at Jews driving past. And assuming she made it there in one piece, her parents would invite the whole family round for Friday night dinner, where they would tell her she was too thin and worked too hard, asking what happened to that Askenazi boyfriend she had, they had someone to set her up with, their neighbour's son, an absolute *motek*. Keren thought about the cotton dress she would wear on Friday night, the tin jug rusted at the bottom that they used to wash their hands before saying the blessing on the *challah*. The Friday night prayers sung smiling, arms around each others' backs, feeling it like heat and light in her chest. Helping her mother make *jachnun*, their hands oiling the dough. They had their best talks then, nothing else to do but knead and shape and wait. She had told Keren how, when Keren and her brother were small, her father would jump

out of bed if they cried, close the bedroom door so she could sleep. He left her tea steaming on the kitchen counter. Those were the small things that mattered, she said.

Keren couldn't make a decision and she didn't know what to do with herself. The news showed the same collapsing buildings over and over. On Netflix *The Walking Dead* irritated her—the story too fake, the actors too good-looking, wounds and scars accentuating their features rather than mangling them, their bravery unbelievable. She paced her flat. She felt she was killing time until the next siren began. She imagined dropping in at Number 8, wondering if his place looked like hers. It must have dog hairs all over the floors. Was he thinking about her, too? He'd said that he'd worried about her up here, alone. He was probably as bored as she was. She pictured them at his kitchen table, steam curling from their coffee into their faces, that tightness in her chest easing, easing, gone. She was halfway to the door before she caught herself and sank back into the desk chair. She forced herself to work on a demo they were preparing for an American bank and when enough time had passed, sat on her sofa and clumsily rolled a joint from the weed in the back of her chest of drawers, leftover from Eyal's stash. She didn't really like to smoke and never alone, but she lit it and puffed at the end and after a few moments, felt her limbs melding into the couch. She stubbed it out. Her phone rang and she ignored it. The ceiling swam gently around and the lights blurred. On the TV, bones crunched and blood spattered, and she felt for the remote and switched it off.

There was noise everywhere. From her phone, from outside the apartment, and a banging, over and over, on her door. Her head and body felt heavy, her mouth dry, lights harsh in her eyes; the whole apartment lit up and her heart jumped in a strange, scattered rhythm in her chest. She opened the door and Number 8 stepped forward, pressed a hand to her back and all but pushed her

down the stairs. She gripped the side rail as they clattered down, the bent heads of people on the floors below already ducking behind the shelter door. They were still on the stairs when the first crash came and the rail she was holding shook. There was no air in her chest. The second one came when they were already inside and Number 8 was pulling the door behind them.

“Where were you?” someone asked, and Keren couldn’t reply.

She breathed in dust, saw the shapes already gathered in a circle, more chairs brought down and unfolded on the concrete floor. This time, no one joked about bringing beer. She checked her phone, lit up with messages, and saw it was 2:00 a.m. She reminded herself of the statistics: it was more likely she’d die in a car crash. Tears pressed behind her eyes.

“Where’s Eyal?”

“Sorry?”

“The sign. On your door.”

“Oh,” she said. “That’s old.”

“It didn’t work out?”

“Clearly not.”

“Why’s that?”

She thought about dismissing the question with a joke or a sharp comment but she wanted to keep talking and she didn’t want to cry and there was something about standing next to Number 8 in the dark, about not having to look him in the eyes, that made her feel like telling him the truth. “He wanted to get married. I used to have nightmares about it. He was still talking to his ex-girlfriend, years after they broke up. I think he was keeping his options open because he knew I was half in. He could never be happy about anything. I’ll give you an example: My brother had a baby and when I told him, the first thing he said was, ‘Now, you’re going to be in Haifa all the time.’ He thought I was always trying to get away from him.”

"I don't blame you. He sounds like a complete idiot."

She sighed. "He tried to get back together with his ex when we broke up but she didn't want him either."

"How long were you together?"

"Two years." She paused. "Sometimes, I think it was the best I'll get. I'm not sure I'll meet anyone, now."

"You're a baby," he said. "Of course you will."

"Maybe I'm not marriage material."

"I used to think that," Number 8 said. "And then I got married."

"So, there's hope?"

He gave a thick laugh. He smelled of smoke. She imagined his fingers, stained nicotine yellow. "Generally, no," he said. "For you, yes. There must be someone at Amazon you work with who loves Yemeni girls with a brain."

"I don't work at Amazon."

He shrugged. "Those places are all the same."

She felt a sharp twinge of irritation, and moments later, relief that she was able to feel something other than this constant, gnawing dread. "How did you meet your wife?" she asked.

"In the supermarket."

"Seriously?"

"Sure. I was standing behind her, waiting to pay. I told her that I could use all the ingredients in her basket to cook her dinner."

Keren laughed. "And she fell for it?"

"Of course not," Number 8 said. "She's too smart for that. But she gave me her number." She could sense him smiling in the dark.

"Where is she now?"

"At her parents'," he said quickly, his voice quiet, and Keren almost missed the words.

"Are they out of range?"

"She says she doesn't like the war." She waited for him to continue but he was silent.

Keren asked, "Is she coming back?"

"Of course," he said, but again, he threw out the words sharply and his shoulders hunched towards his neck. He called to the pregnant woman, "When are you due?"

A conversation began about the woman's hair during pregnancy, which she claimed was fuller and shinier than usual, and which hospital she planned to give birth in, where, it turned out, Number 8's wife was a nurse. They continued talking when they left the shelter and returned to their flats and it was only when Number 8 reached his door, the rest of the neighbours already gone, that he looked directly at her.

"Stay safe," he said. Keren nodded. He looked as if he was about to say something else and took a half step towards her. She waited, her chest a little tight, clutching the rail leading up to her apartment, but after a moment, he turned away and shut the door and she was left on the stairs, alone.

That night, Keren flitted in and out of sleep, her dreams full of cockroaches crawling up the bedroom walls, thunder crashing over the sea, dogs butting her shins as she lay in bed. Number 8 stood in the corner, by her whirring plastic fan. The curtains flapped away from the windows, trapping themselves around his legs. His long T-shirt swamped him and he climbed into bed with her, pressing his body against hers, arms encircling her from behind, reaching under her T-shirt to cup her breasts. In the morning, she was revolted by the thought of his nicotine-stained fingers on her body, and worse, of liking it. She had only seen him in the dark; she barely knew what he looked like. And if she were attracted to much older men, it would be George Clooney or Ran Shahar, not Number 8 with his checked pyjama bottoms and smokers' cough. Still, as she brushed her teeth, she kept wondering what he was doing. Was he making Turkish coffee, heat beading on his

glass mug? Taking Cornflakes for a walk around the block? When the taps rushed from his shower, she felt a little rush of elation, a confirmation he was really there, and when the next siren came, later that afternoon, she was ready. She ran down the stairs, pulse quickening, because of the rockets, she told herself, and he was in the shelter waiting, holding two Tuborgs in one hand, the caps already popped off.

“To Hamas,” he said, and she actually laughed. She felt a giddy lightness and in the dark, unable to see his eyes, willed for him to lean over and whisper in her ear, stirring the fine hairs by her neck. He smelled faintly of sweat and had a dog and seemed to have a strange suspicion of technology, but when he brought down a folding chair for her or stamped on a cockroach close by, she felt like he was giving her a gift. Once, he reached over and picked up the ends of her hair and she found herself holding her breath.

“You could take this much off,” he said, stretching his thumb and finger wide and though she would never cut her hair short, she nodded. The heat of his hand by her neck lingered after he’d taken it away. She imagined him pushing her back against the wall, kissing her in the dark, the neighbours oblivious.

Twice a day in the shelter, sometimes three, in the middle of the night, she and Number 8 talked about the fuck ups of her life: her parents had caught her having sex in her mum’s car when she was seventeen, she couldn’t quit her job because the CTO had offered her a retainer to stay four more years, she had panic attacks after Eyal and her broke up, the room spinning like she was drunk, her breathing rasping in her ears. She even told him about the two-month detox she’d started after reading a book on nutrition—the idea had seized her, and like that, she was committed. She kept it up until her brother filled her wine glass for a *l’chaim* at her dad’s birthday barbecue and she nearly fainted after a couple of sips. After that, it was all over. She went back to eating like she always

had. The others at work told her they were relieved. They couldn't stand the sight of any more spinach and avocado shakes. They even took a picture of her biting into her first burger when they ordered lunch. Children, Number 8 called them, though he didn't sound surprised.

Between rockets, she never visited him, though he'd said his salon was closed and he must have known she was upstairs, tapping away at her computer. This made her feel a new sort of tension, quite different from the sickening nerves of waiting for a siren. It felt like her insides were coiled tight. Was the fact he hadn't come over a sign he wasn't interested? She replayed all the times he had touched her, how he'd lifted her hair, stood so close to her she could feel the heat from his arms against hers or pushed her down the stairs towards the shelter, hand firm against her back. He'd had plenty of chances to make a move when they were alone and never had. Maybe it was because Number 8 wasn't sure how she felt. Maybe he thought *she* was the one who wasn't interested.

Keren wished she could tell him that she didn't mind he was married (clearly, he would soon be divorced) and after she'd brought him home to her family a few times, they would get used to the fact he was so much older. She would ask him to smoke on the balcony so the flat wouldn't smell. But how could he know that? Her mind worked in a furious loop, remembering that he smiled when he mentioned his wife. Then again, he never spoke about the specifics of their relationship. Why had his wife left him in the middle of the war? Keren felt compelled to imagine and reimagine all the small interactions they'd had, an exciting sort of torture. For the first time since the war started, time flew. Towards the end of the following week, when the news reported an upcoming ceasefire, she felt exhausted as they stood together.

Keren said, "We'll still be living here tomorrow."

"Obviously. Pop round for coffee whenever."

“I will.”

“I still need to check the leak. In your bathroom.”

“Any time.”

They were silent and she was glad of the dark. Keren bent down and stroked Cornflakes. On the stairs up to their flats, she looked at Number 8’s back, how he stooped to tug Cornflakes’ lead and she reached out to touch his hand, then stopped herself.

There were no rockets in Tel Aviv the last few days of the war and after the ceasefire, cafes and bars filled up again. There were still stories of lynchings, Jews smashing Arab stores not too far away, and a section of Keren’s company car park became a temporary garage for cars that had been set on fire, nowhere else to put them. The windows and windscreens were hollowed out, the frames mangled, black. But even after passing them every day, her colleagues soon became bored of talking about the war. With her life full and busy again, the time in the shelter seemed unreal. One morning, early, there was a knock on her door. She hadn’t been expecting anyone. She had a bad habit of letting housework pile up—dishes in the sink, dirty laundry overflowing the basket, spills on the floors—then would spend a full day scrubbing and organising the entire flat. She had pushed the balcony blinds apart and dirty espresso cups littered the outside table, dark rings staining the wood. Still, it was too late to do anything now. She pulled the front door wide.

Number 8 stood in front of her. “Hi,” he said.

“Hi.” Her heart jerked to her throat. He shielded his eyes against the light from the balcony.

“How are you?”

“Fine. You?”

“Fine. Nice to finally have some quiet.”

“Right.”

He was taller than she remembered. Strange to have forgotten a thing like that, having stood side by side for ten days. Maybe he stooped in the dark, knowing no one could see. "I thought you'd be at work."

"I'm on my way in."

"I won't keep you, then." He hovered by the entrance. His glasses were lopsided, sloping down his nose. He looked older than she'd thought. There were deep wrinkles around his eyes that made him seem tired. "I still have that leak in my ceiling. Can I take a look at your bathroom?"

"Sure." She gestured for him to step past her into the flat. He kicked off his flip flops, though he couldn't have made the floors dirtier. His eyes darted around. "It's different from my place," he said.

"Is it?"

She followed him into the bathroom and Number 8 crouched next to the bath. "I think it's the pipes," he said.

Keren watched him. She could only see his arms and the back of his neck. There he was, amongst her shower gels and loofah, her razor balanced on the tiles, a pack of tampons above the toilet seat. He looked like a stranger. In the sunlight, with cars honking outside, she imagined tugging at his T-shirt until he turned to face her, leading him to her bed. The thought filled her with mild revulsion. She waited in the doorway whilst he peered around her bath.

"Well," he said, straightening up. "I'm going to call someone. They may need to come and look."

"No problem." They moved into the living room and he tugged the front door open. He nodded behind her head at her two computer screens, heavy headphones balanced on the desk. "You better get back to your golden cage."

“I guess,” she said, feeling a flicker of irritation. She smelled smoke coming off him. There was a silence. She remembered racing down the stairs to the shelter to meet him, excitement and fear bubbling in her, the cold clink of their beers against each other. Willing him, praying for him to kiss her. It embarrassed her, that memory. Her eyes slid from his, to the hallway and the stairs that led down to his flat.

“You took the sign off your door,” he said.

“I needed to. I—”

“Itzhak?” a woman’s voice called.

“Coming,” he called back. She heard their front door click shut. “Woman has no patience.”

Her eyes snapped back to his. There was another silence and before it got too much, she said, “Let’s hope it stays quiet.”

“Let’s hope,” he echoed, giving her a half salute, one of his familiar farewell gestures. He turned and trudged down the stairs. She thought about what they would say to each other when they saw each other next. Maybe they would discuss the leak and after that was dealt with, exchange a brief smile. That would do: a smile. She glanced back at her front door. Taking down the welcome sign had left a neat little rectangle, brighter than the rest of the wood. Keren felt something hollow open in her chest. Yesterday, Daniel, the CTO, had said he wanted to set her up with his cousin. She thought of the time she had spent rearranging her life in her head, slotting Eyal, Number 8, into its different parts. How much longer it took to slot them back. She had to go to work. The sun flashed in her eyes and she squinted against it. Outside, car horns blared.