DISPLACED PERSONS

·◊·

My neighbor's son wants to move to Germany. He's twenty-one and went four times on heal-the-wounds summer programs, young Germans in dialogue groups with young Israelis like him, and spent two years studying the language at the Goethe Institute on the other side of Tel Aviv. He's done with the army and is ready for university. College is free in Germany, he tells his parents, and Berlin is exciting. Progressive ideas, lots of new jazz, a hub of Europe now that there's the EU. Israel feels provincial,

isolated. The Jewish piece has nothing to do with it, he says. His grandparents' history is just that: history.

"Can you picture me telling this to my mother?" Sigalit says over untouched tea at my kitchen table in her excellent college level English. I know her mother's story, she doesn't have to remind me. "She'll have a fit." Sigalit's voice is hoarse from I don't know what, crying or shouting, though she doesn't seem to be the shouting type. I'm the only person she can tell. Because I'm an American. A politician recently started a fire storm by urging in *Ha'aretz* that all Israelis eligible for German passports—offered to every descendant of German Jews stripped of their citizenship in the war—should apply. No border hassles traveling through Europe. Cheap higher education. Abundant opportunities for work. And the unsayable: a place to go if Israel is wiped off the map by Hamas or Hezbollah or Iran. Germany as a safe haven for Jews if their existence here is threatened. This, for even the most cosmopolitan, globe-trotting Israelis, is hard to swallow.

"What does Omer think?" I ask, inching the tea in her direction. I don't know Sigalit's husband well. I see him at the mailboxes talking to the other tenants about the goings-on in the Knesset and which parties will leave the government today and which threatened to leave yesterday. That and his motorcycle. It's from the 1980s, and he refuses to give it up though it makes Sigalit crazy. He's had two accidents in the last three months. Doesn't he want to stay alive for his sons? she says. Doesn't he want to live to see them get married or have children or graduate university?

Though if the university is in Germany it might be a

different story. "Omer says I'm over-reacting. That lots of Israelis are doing it. Which I know, I read the papers. Four thousand applied for German passports this year alone." Sigalit finally notices the cup, picks it up. "He says I'm being neurotic, that it's not 1939 anymore. And anyway all the kids get wanderlust after the army so who knows how long Gideon would stay."

She takes a sip. What do I know? I grew up in Connecticut. Nobody I knew ever had to go to an army. Nobody I knew survived the Holocaust. We didn't have people like that in our West Hartford temple. "Could it be some kind of rebellion?" I venture. Canned psychology; it sounds so American.

Sigalit takes out a tissue and wipes her eyes. She is constantly weepy. Her 88-year-old mother is hanging on in an old age home ten minutes from our building, which Sigalit visits for two hours every day when she's not bringing her mother to her apartment for meals. "It's not rebellion." She stuffs the tissue into her pocket. "He really likes German culture. And how can I argue with him? Look at what they produced. Bach. Beethoven. Thomas Mann. Not everyone was Goering and Himmler." She waves toward my window. "You want to hear the irony? Out there, Ben-Yehuda Street? My mother says they used to call it Ben-Yehudastrasse after the war. Little German-run shops, tea houses where people sat all day discussing Max Weber. It was schizophrenic. On the one hand, Germany was totally taboo—the first Israeli passports were marked as valid for any country in the world but there—but then they replicated the society as closely as they could." She

pulls herself out of her chair. "I should relax, right? The Germans have been paying for their history for decades; reparations practically built this country." She goes to the door, puts her hand on the knob. "And all those earnest young volunteers who come on atonement missions, the most apologetic people on the planet."

I know who she means. I've seen them outside the nursing homes and recreation centers, energetic types with names out of fairy tales. Hans. Gretchen. Hedwig. At night they're at the pubs by the beach; some have turned up in my beginners Hebrew class, part of the deal I made with my American university. In exchange for a shockingly generous stipend, I'm supposed to be doing research on a community of so-called displaced persons inside the country—foreign workers from the Philippines, refugees from Sudan, irradiated children from Chernobyl, pick your desperate subgroup, plenty to choose from right here in Tel Aviv—then go back to the States and write up a thesis and collect my degree. Problem is, I don't feel like doing any of that. Especially the part about going back.

"Hey, wait," she says, stopping at the open door. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"Maybe you can be the one to tell my mother about Gideon." A revelation. "Yes! She loves you, nothing you could say would upset her. She's always asking about the nice American across the hall."

"Are you crazy?" I say. "I don't know how to talk about twenty-year-olds; I just finished being one myself. Or about Germany."

"No, no, it'll be fine." She's smiling broadly. "You'll see, you can do it."

~

It's not entirely true that I didn't know any survivors as a kid. I met one once. She came to my friend Elise's seder when I was sixteen. My father had finally left for good, and my mother wasn't in great shape. I wasn't either, but I did a better job hiding it. My mother's sister Carla was urging her to go with her and my Uncle Dave on a Caribbean cruise, it would cheer her up, she had vacation time coming from the insurance company where she and Carla both worked as claims adjusters; their specialty was vehicular wrecks. My mother wasn't so sure it was a smart idea, all that forced gaiety, but Carla was insistent. A college student, Lori, stayed over each night so I wouldn't be alone.

The cruise fell during Passover, not a big deal in my family. Elise invited me. We weren't particularly good friends but I sat next to her in Spanish and she lived around the block. Her mother had probably suggested it. They liked to have guests, her mother told me when I arrived with a box of candy. We distributed ourselves around a long table and took turns reading from the Haggadah. Her father could read in Hebrew; the rest of us stumbled through the archaic English. *Once we were slaves, now we are free. Rescued from bondage with an outstretched hand.* Elise had a big family, cousins and uncles and aunts, and they were all there. Her grandparents drove up from New York and brought a friend.

The friend was a slight, brittle woman in her seventies with a severe black bun, sapphire earrings that sat like giant blue marbles alongside her face, and a thick accent. She seemed to look down her nose at everyone at the table. She spoke to nobody after the initial hellos, and when it was her turn to read, she waved the moment away like she was dismissing a servant. I was seated opposite her, and though I tried not to look at her, it was hard not to notice the constant frown and bird-like appetite. Every time I took a bite I felt disapproval washing over me, as if I was committing some disgusting act of gluttony.

After the main course I got up to help clear. When I got to the woman's seat, I lifted her barely touched plate, balancing the knife and fork on it as I raised it over her shoulder.

"You must not kerry ze plate zet vay. It is rude."

"Excuse me?" I said. I was sure I hadn't heard correctly.

"You hev poor menors," she said, looking up at me. "You should vemove ze knive und kerry it in de otter hend. American yung pipple hev no refinement."

I didn't know what to say. Elise had told me the woman was a Holocaust survivor, that her grandmother knew a few in her building. In the kitchen I repeated to Elise what the woman had said.

"Old people can be such pains in the asses," she said, scraping plates over the trash can. She glanced around the empty kitchen and lowered her voice. "Let's do some weed before dessert, before my mother notices we're gone."

"What about your cousins?" Four preteen girls had been hanging on to Elise all night. I was surprised none

of them had come into the kitchen to admire her over the garbage pail.

"We'll tell them we're getting their presents ready."

"What presents?" I whispered. Elise's mother and aunts had returned from the basement refrigerator where they'd retrieved her mother's signature holiday desserts: chocolate mousse cake, homemade sorbet, frosted macaroons from a famous bakery in downtown Hartford.

Elise rubbed her thumb and forefinger together. Money. In her family, people gave the children silver dollars on Passover. She'd give the girls paper bills if she had to. Anything for a little privacy so we could get sufficiently stoned.

I followed Elise out and moved quickly through the dining room on the way to the stairs. Immediately the four girls appeared by the banister.

"We'll be right back; we're getting something special for you, but you've got to be patient," Elise told them. I looked up. The old lady was watching, her head cocked slightly to the side, appraising, mouth in that frown. On her list of rude behaviors, leaving the dining table during the meal had to be way up there. Elise's grandparents were going to get an earful on the drive home.

I caught the woman's eye. *I'm sorry about your past,* I wanted to call out, *but that doesn't mean I should feel guilty for eating or sneaking off with my friend or getting high or living.* But of course I didn't do that. I considered waving, or even smiling, but before I could make up my mind she had turned her head and was glaring at the lushly excessive display of sweets.

~

After Sigalit leaves, I head out to the African Refugee Center in south Tel Aviv, my chosen displaced community where, to aid my alleged research, I teach English two nights a week to fourteen men from Sudan and Eritrea and Ivory Coast and other hemorrhaging places. Fifty thousand Africans are in Israel after managing to cross the border with Egypt. The Israelis don't know what to do with them. If they welcome them, they're afraid a million more will come; if they send them back, the Africans will get killed or tortured. The men in my class are in their twenties and thirties; one is married. I don't ask where their families are. The center's coordinator, a volunteer like the rest of us, told me: *Don't ask personal questions. These are private people. Anyway, you read the newspapers. So you know.*

"Hallo, Miss Zhenna," Habib says, out of breath as he enters the classroom after jogging up the narrow stairs. He's always the first to arrive and the last to leave. He's twenty-two, from Darfur, and in four months has picked up more street Hebrew than I have in almost a year and is doing pretty amazingly in English too. Before arriving in Israel he'd never seen a computer or a movie. Now he tells me he's learning English from the films he catches on TV in the three-room flat he shares with seven other Sudanese. Four to a room, they sleep on mattresses and have a working kitchen and bathroom, deluxe accommodations compared to some. Habib works at a car factory in Jaffa. He starts at 5 A.M. and finishes at 7 P.M. except on nights when he has classes and his employer lets him off early. He's lucky to have a job.

"Jenna," I say, emphasizing the J. "Try it, Habib. *Jenna.*"

"Zhenna," Habib says, watching my mouth. "Shenna," he tries again.

"Much better. How's everything?" I ask, knowing what's coming. The reason Habib is always first is because he wants to find out how to get to America and is certain I must know people who can help. He knows he can't become a citizen of Israel anytime soon because he is neither Jewish nor an officially UN-approved refugee, a process that can take years. But in America anyone can apply anytime, he says. America is for everyone.

"Everything fine, Miss Shenna. I love this country. *Kol b'seder,*" he adds in Hebrew. Everything's all right.

"Good. I'm glad to hear it," I say, unpacking my papers and getting them ready on the desk.

"But is difficult for me here. I not Jewish. I not Hebrew. I want citizen but cannot get."

I nod. "I know, Habib. You would like to get citizenship."

"I would like."

"I know," I say, hoping the footsteps on the stairs outside belong to someone in my class and not in the room opposite because Habib is smart and sweet and achingly persistent, and every one of these pre-class conversations tears me up inside because there's nothing I can do. All I can do is teach him some English so that wherever he goes next, he'll at least have that. "Well, for now you have a job and a place to live, so things are okay at the moment, right?"

"Yes, yes, very okay," and then there's a crush of bodies at the door. Everyone arrives at the same time. Habib high-

fives whoever will high-five him back and goes to the table and takes a seat. The others smile at me, shyly say hello. They are exceedingly polite. At their seats they take out the name cards I insisted everyone make the first night. Emanuel. Yohannes. Mamadu. My PhD plan was to write a pithily incisive chapter about each one, laced with shimmering insights about what it means for thousands of traumatized 21st century refugees to seek shelter in a country defined by thousands of traumatized refugees of the 20th, but I haven't written a thesis-worthy sentence all year. The thought of reducing their lives to case studies for the purpose of netting me a university degree seems obscene.

Today I have brought maps of the United States, courtesy of an acquaintance who works at the U.S. embassy. The center has no materials and no money to buy any. The students are thrilled to each receive their own map, which opens to the size of an umbrella. Yellow and pink and red and blue states cover the big table like a colorful tablecloth at a July Fourth picnic.

I tape mine to the whiteboard. We go around the room taking turns reading the names of the states aloud. New Chair-See. Flow-ree-dah. Mary-Land. O-hee-oh. Nobody can say Louisiana or Massachusetts. I describe snow, but it is impossible to explain. It is not ice, not rain; it is not anything anyone in the room has ever seen. I pronounce Connecticut, my home state, and tell them about the beaches, the ships at Mystic Seaport, the stone architecture at Yale. I write vocabulary words of questionable utility on the board. Cathedral. Lighthouse. Aquarium. It was at Mystic where my father conducted his first flagrantly outrageous

affair, which was with my mother's best friend, Bonnie. I was twelve; Bonnie's girls and I went to day camp together. My father liked to pick women close to the family.

Issa from Eritrea raises his hand. There's a rumor going around that Meredith, one of the other American volunteers who's killing time in Israel while figuring out what to do next, is angling for a relationship with him. All the other volunteers say it's a bad idea, she's just playing with him, Issa will get hurt, they can't possibly bridge the divide. She'll leave when her year is up and resume her cushy life in Teaneck or Skokie or wherever and he'll still be a dishwasher without a passport in Tel Aviv.

"Yes, Issa?" I ask.

"What you miss in America?"

"Miss?"

Issa nods. He is handsome and sincere and I understand why Meredith is interested. Fourteen pairs of eyes watch me. Their expressions are somber. I know what they miss. They miss their families, their homes. They miss what they will never have again.

"I don't miss the snow and ice," I say and laugh, but they don't get it. "What I mean is, I don't miss the difficulties of living in a cold climate."

Another hand. Namanya, who wants to become an English teacher in his home country if he can ever go back. "No, no. We not ask what you *don't* miss. We ask what you *do* miss."

I can't joke my way through this. The men have no taste for glibness. "My mother, I guess," I say, surprising myself, and they nod. Of course. There is no question. Of

course I'd miss my mother. Everyone in the room misses their mother.

What else? they ask.

I draw a blank.

Nothing? They are incredulous. They miss everything: the fields, the sky, the fruits and trees, the quiet. Even what they never had. Emanuel, in the back, says he has not lived in his own country since he was four; he was born in Liberia but his family was kicked out and he lived the next eighteen years in five other countries. "I am remembering only one yellow wall of the house of my grandmother. I do not see it for nineteen years." He puts his hand over his eyes so we won't see that he is welling up.

Nothing else? they ask again.

"I miss the libraries," I offer. "We have big public libraries in America. You can borrow all the books you could ever want. No charge. All free, all the time."

They smile dutifully. They cannot fathom why I don't come up with something more visceral and heartfelt than a house of books. How can you live somewhere for thirty years and not miss its textures, its colors, its smells, its sounds? The men sense my discomfort. Mamadu, thirty-five and married, wants to go back to the map. He has heard of Martin Luther King and civil rights but doesn't know which state this important man came from. Can I show them?

I turn to the whiteboard. This, I warn them, will be a mouthful. While I slowly draw out the word, a chaotic chorus of *Mee-sees-aye-pi* behind me, I make a mental note to tell Sigalit that Gideon will miss her, that she shouldn't

worry about that at least. But then I decide not to bring it up. What if Gideon doesn't put *Mother* high up on his list? What if he, like me, decides he doesn't miss very much of his home country at all?

~

When my advisor, Professor Audra Silk, offered me a choice of research countries, I roamed all over the map for days. Rwanda? Ukraine? India? There were displaced people everywhere. The whole world was carrying their belongings on their backs and walking in lines.

"How about a place where you have some attachment?" she said kindly. "Perhaps an emotional or personal connection?"

Attachment? Connection? I'd never thought of that. I went back to the atlas. It jumped out at me. I was Jewish, if minimally. What about Israel?

"That sounds like a good idea," my mother said when I reached her in Hartford. "I've never been there. Maybe I'll visit."

"Israel?" my father said in a rare phone call from his current home in Boca Raton with his current wife. I was pretty sure he was cheating again; he only communicated when his marriages were on the rocks. "I hear it's just like Florida. Hot and humid. Great beaches. Jewish food. Why not just come down here to bake in the sun like the rest of us?" Then he laughed.

That cinched it. I turned in my proposal and bought my ticket the next day.

~

Gideon has been accepted at Humboldt University in Berlin. It's all happening faster than Sigalit expected. If word gets out, if one of Gideon's friends tells another, who tells another, who tells his parents who then tell a grandmother at the old folks home in the neighborhood, the news, Sigalit is certain, will kill her mother.

"We have to make a plan right now," she says. We're taking a morning power walk on the promenade by the sea before Sigalit goes off to the fancy private hospital in north Tel Aviv where she works in the gastroenterology department handling the paperwork for diplomats and tourists who require professional level English. Two bicyclists in racing gear whiz by. "Next time I bring her home for dinner you come too. How about tomorrow? We'll eat, then I'll run out on an errand and you can slip it into a conversation. *So I heard about Gideon, what a smart boy.* Something like that. Okay? I'll be nowhere within shouting distance."

"Are you afraid of your mother?" I ask.

Sigalit huffs and puffs. She's almost fifty and out of shape. Plus the ambassador from France had a colonoscopy last week and sent everyone in her department trays of French pastries in thanks. She looks over at me. Sweat drips down her nose. "Of course I am. Isn't everyone?"

I tell her my mother is a pussycat.

"You're lucky. My mother's tough. The war toughened her, the DP camps toughened her. Then Israel toughened her."

"Maybe she'll see it as getting even," I try. "Sticking it

to Hitler. Free tuition for Gideon. Like private reparations."

She gives me a sour look. "My mother refused."

"Refused what?"

"Reparations. A German funded pension. She's entitled, you know; they all were." She stops to wipe her face with a towel while a woman on rollerblades glides past with a little dog in tow. In her spiffy lycra shorts and matching shirt she dodges around us, two slowpokes in sweats and fanny packs. "My mother is very proud," Sigalit says. "She says she'll never take The German Money. That's what she calls it. The German Money. She says her forgiveness is not for sale."

~

The day after the seder, Elise and I hung out at my empty house because it was exciting to be unsupervised. I'd promised my mother I wouldn't do anything risky when Lori, the college student, wasn't there, like have a party or let anyone use drugs, and I had no intention of breaking her trust. But just the thought of something forbidden was thrilling. Plus Elise's grandparents had slept over at her house and she needed a break from all the people.

"Where's their friend?" I asked, passing Elise the peanut butter and jelly sandwich I'd made for her. Bread was outlawed at Elise's on Passover, giving my house even more added allure. Personally, I'd been intrigued by the matzoh-only concept, but Elise wanted to break rules.

"My dad drove her to some people in Avon last night while my mom and grandma did the dishes." Elise licked

the jelly oozing out near the crusts. "My grandma says she has hardly any family. Which is why she invited her to our house."

I watched Elise eat. Bread was no big deal to me; I could have bread all week, and probably would, though my mother had bought me a box of matzoh before she left, in case I wanted to be a little more Jewish on my own. We'd called it the bread of affliction at the seder to remind us of being in bondage. One of Elise's little cousins had opined that matzoh was probably pita because that's what they ate in the Middle East, and that the only thing the Exodus story said about the flight from Egypt was that the Israelites couldn't wait to let their bread rise because they were in a hurry. My father, who'd also been in a hurry, hadn't bothered to say goodbye. Six months later, when my mother would have to sell the house and she and I would move to a small apartment in downtown Hartford, my father would come to get the rest of his stuff and explain his hasty departure when my mother was out of the room by saying he'd finally found the love of his life and he'd be damned if he was going to let some youthful mistakes—presumably my mother and me—hold him back.

"Your grandparents' friend," I asked Elise, "was she, like, in a concentration camp?"

Elise shrugged, focusing on the jelly.

"Well, do you know what country she's from? She's got a majorly heavy accent."

"I can ask my grandma. Though I don't think her friend talks about it." She looked over at me. "Why do you want to know?"

"Just curious. I don't know anyone who survived the Holocaust."

Elise went back to her illegal lunch. "You're so serious, Jenna. You should lighten up sometimes."

~

A crew of students from a local college is filming the Refugee Center for a project. The coordinator has arranged for them to interview Issa and Habib after class. Would I be willing to stay to the end and lock up?

At eight-thirty, Issa, Habib and I are still waiting for the Israelis to straighten out a glitch with their equipment. I go down the steep stairs to find out if there's been any progress.

"Almost ready," Gila, the apparent director, says. "We testing the sound." She's short and squat and doesn't make eye contact. Her cameraman, a lanky guy with glasses, is on the floor, hunched over a swarm of cables. They've been at the center since six. Issa and Habib are the only people they're interviewing. They've had two hours to test the sound.

"Did you just notice the problem?" I ask. Habib gets up at four, Issa at five.

"I thought he tests at school," Gila says, gesturing at the guy on the floor.

"You were supposed to do it," he mumbles without looking up.

Gila lets loose a flood of irritable Hebrew. A third person shows up, a skinny kid holding a tangle of wires and cords who nods at me and hunches over the

equipment with the other guy.

"Look, Gila," I say, "the men upstairs have been waiting since eight o'clock. They have to be at work at five in the morning. Which means they were at work at five *this* morning." I'm aiming to be polite and subtle, though that isn't always the best tack to take with Israelis, who usually do better with in-your-face directness. "You can't keep them here much longer."

Gila waves, still not looking at me. "One minute more," she says.

I tromp up the noisy stairs. Issa and Habib look up hopefully. Neither has uttered a word of complaint; all the complaining is coming from me. It occurs to me that neither of them has probably had any dinner.

"They say only one more minute. I'm really sorry."

"Is not your fault," Habib says, though it is my fault. Why didn't I tell the coordinator that the visitors couldn't start filming at eight-thirty, or even eight; that these men have to go to work in nine hours?

We use the time to conjugate a few more verbs. *I wait. I waited. I will wait. I am still waiting.* Clattering on the stairs. Gila strides in, hand on hip. "We do a sound test now," she announces.

We file down the steps. By nine o'clock they're ready. Gila sits Issa and Habib at a table in the hallway. I take a seat in a torn easy chair to the side. "Okay, look at me, not the camera," Gila commands, loud, as if the men are deaf. Her own English is thickly accented and I know they'll have trouble understanding her. She seats herself opposite them, then motions to the guy with the glasses to move the

camera closer.

"Tell me your name and where you from." She points at Issa. "You first, please."

"My name is Issa. I am from Eritrea." He folds his hands.

"And you?"

"I am Habib. I am from Darfur. You know about Darfur?"

The cameraman, trying for a close-up, stumbles against a chair, rights himself. Gila watches him, then turns back, distracted. "Okay, tell me how long you are in Israel and why you come here and what happen to you that you come." She points at Habib. "You first."

"I come from Sudan four month ah-go," Habib says.

"I come one year ah-go," says Issa.

"So why you came here?"

"Very bad in my country," Habib says. "Civil war. Israel is wonderful country."

"But what is happen to you in Sudan? To your family? Tell me exactly." Gila motions to the cameraman to come closer to Habib. I move up to the edge of my chair, ready like a TV lawyer to bounce up and object. Her course at the college is called The Sociology of Displacement. Nobody has prepared her for how to talk to these men. Nobody has prepared her for anything.

"Many refugees from Darfur. People dying. Not enough food. Also disease," Habib says. The camera is inches from his face.

"But what about you, what is happen to you there?" Gila prods.

"Very difficult. So I am walking to Israel. Across Egypt. Israel very good place," Habib says, trying to ignore the looming camera.

"Are your parents alive? Were they murdered? Tortured?"

"Gila!" I'm up like a shot.

"You interrupting," she says.

"That's right. You need to change the subject. NOW."

She purses her lips, motions to the cameraman to start again. "What about rape, did they rape the women in your family?"

"Gila!"

She looks at me blankly.

"New topic," I say. "Otherwise –." I point to the front door. No more subtlety.

She exhales loudly. Turns back. "You like Tel Aviv? Israelis, they are nice to you?"

I sit back down, perch on the edge of my seat.

"Everybody very nice," Issa says. "Help us very much."

"What do they help with? Jobs?"

"Yes, jobs."

"You have a job?"

"I work at a car factory in Jaffa," Habib says, smiling.

"The owner, he is Moslem? Like you?"

"Moslem, yes."

"Jews not offer a job?"

"I work at Jewish restaurant," Issa says. "Dishwasher. Very good."

Gila trains her sights on Issa. "Is good to be a dishwasher?"

"Very good."

"Do you think Israelis are racist?" Gila says.

I start to get up. "Racist?" Habib says.

"Treat you bad," Gila says. "Because you black." She motions to the cameraman to pan them, capture their faces.

"Nobody racist," Habib says.

"Are you crazy?" Gila says. "Is a big problem here. We have to learn tolerant."

Habib arches his body away from the hovering camera. "We very happy here. I have job. Issa have job. We learn at this center. Miss Shenna, she teaching us Anglish. I learning Hebrew, computers."

I've had enough. I stand up. Then, a miracle: the cameraman is having a technical problem. He lowers his equipment, examines something.

"Okay, it's a wrap," I say.

"I'm not finished," Gila says.

"Sorry, time's up." I tell the two crew to pack up, they can work on their equipment outside. *Chick-chock,* I say, Israeli style. Get moving.

Issa and Habib wait at the table. "You guys can go home now," I say.

"My Anglish very bad," Issa says.

"Are you kidding? You sounded great," I tell him. "Both of you sounded great."

"Really?" Habib says, grinning.

"Absolutely." I want to tell them that only one person in the room sounded bad and it wasn't me, but that wouldn't be nice so I refrain. "You spoke beautifully."

They are beaming. "Maybe one day I be on TV!" Habib says. "Movie star!" He lightly punches Issa on the shoulder. "Yah, Issa? You too."

Issa blushes. He really could be a movie star. He has the high cheekbones and almond eyes of the young Yul Brynner in *The Ten Commandments*. I hold the door open for them and wish them good night. I want to give them fifty shekels for a couple of falafels and Cokes, tell them it's from the interviewer's college, but that would be a lie and a violation of the center's rules: no money to students, it's insulting and patronizing. Before they step out into the night, they ask if I'm okay by myself, do I want them to wait, they will walk me to the main road, but I tell them I'll be fine, and that they should go home and get some sleep.

~

After my mother returned from the cruise she asked about the seder. I told her it was different from the four or five seders we'd managed to pull off when we were still a regular little nuclear family, lurching affairs for which my mother would make all the traditional foods from a cookbook and my father would dig out a few dusty Haggadahs and we'd all go through the motions without much conviction, as if we were actors in somebody else's altogether too long play.

"Different?" my mother asked, unpacking her suitcase on the bed. "How so?"

"Lots more desserts. Her dad could read Hebrew."

"Uh huh," my mother said, hanging up a pair of silk pants. She'd hardly worn any of the fancy clothes she'd brought and had mostly sat on the deck in jeans and a sweatshirt. The finality of my father's departure had hit her out there on the ocean in a way, she said, that sitting

in our house in West Hartford hadn't. But Carla and Dave had been great, thank God for Carla and Dave.

"There was a Holocaust survivor there," I said. "A friend of Elise's grandmother." I made it sound casual, but the truth was I couldn't stop thinking about the woman. I wanted to know the whole story, all the lurid details, and it made me feel vaguely dirty and depraved, like wanting to see pornography.

"How did you know she was a Holocaust survivor?" my mother asked from inside her closet. "Did it come up?" she said, passing me to go into the shower.

"Elise told me," I called over the spray, then went downstairs to make dinner. After a little while my mother came down. Her hair was wet and she looked really tired for someone who'd just been on vacation.

"I think there's something wrong with me," I said.

"What makes you think that?" my mother said, picking at the splendid pasta and jarred tomato sauce dinner I had prepared.

"I can't stop thinking about this survivor. I want to know what happened to her. Everything. I'm talking about all the horrible stuff."

My mother put down her fork. She needed a glass of wine, I could tell. Or a stiff drink. "That's normal, honey," she said. "You know how when there's an accident on the highway, everyone turns to look? It's a little like that. People want to see the carnage. Just like they want the gory details of a divorce. Who cheated and where and all the juiciest parts. I don't know why. Maybe because they want to know how bad things can get. The things we're

all afraid will happen to us. But then it goes and happens to somebody else." She picked up her fork and pushed around a few tubes of ziti before giving up and going for her water glass.

"But that's not the worst part," I said, and lowered my voice. I was in my own kitchen with my own mother and nobody else, and still I needed to whisper. "She wasn't very nice, Mom. Actually, she was kind of mean."

My mother folded her hands, choosing her words. "That's a hard truth, honey. Suffering doesn't necessarily make you a nicer person. It also doesn't make people like you. Though usually it makes them pity you."

~

I write Professor Silk to say my displaced persons group is proving harder to write about than I'd thought.

Language barrier? she emails back immediately. It's one in the morning in New York. Professor Silk is a dedicated teacher. *Cultural diffs? Over-identification with subjects? Lack of professional distance? Second thoughts about continuing degree?*

Yes yes yes yes yes, I write back.

~

A month before my mother went on her cruise, I came home early from school with a headache and let myself in. Carla's Toyota in front of the house meant nothing; she and my mother often went shopping in the afternoon or out to lunch, coordinating their work schedules at the insurance company so they could spend time together.

My father's car in the driveway was more surprising.

They hadn't closed the bedroom door all the way. Later, I thought it had probably excited my father to do something so reckless. I lay on my own bed staring at the ceiling and listening to the moans and the creaking headboard and Carla's loose laugh, my door wide open, waiting for them to find me, but then I heard them on the stairs, the front door opening and closing, their ignitions starting, and made a decision right then never to tell my mother.

~

Gideon's grandmother didn't drop dead or rip her shirt in mourning or even whimper. She sighed and said it was Gideon's life and that he should make sure to tell everyone he met in Germany that he was a Jew, an Israeli, and stand tall.

"Incredible. Do you think I've been delusional all this time?" Sigalit says when I report. We're having a celebratory post-dinner glass of wine in her kitchen. Omer has driven her mother back to the old age home.

"People change," I offer. As if I would know. Sigalit gets up and brings a little box of chocolates to the table to add to the festive atmosphere. She fills the hot water pot for tea. I like Sigalit's apartment. It's messy and cramped and always smells of cooking and laundry and teenage boys and their dozens of friends tromping in and out. This morning I received a surprise email from my father. He'd seen something on the news about Israel and wondered how I was; a friend in Boca had mentioned it. From this I gleaned there was a new woman. The new women

always pressed him to contact me, which he would do once or twice before going back to his old disinterested ways; I used to write back hopefully and wait for an answer but I've learned not to do that anymore. A year after the cruise, my mother found out about the affair between my father and Carla. A neighbor had seen them trekking in and out, and had asked. In Carla's tearful confession, she said she'd wanted my mother on the trip because she felt guilty and thought it might help her break it off. And because she wanted an excuse not to spend so much time alone with Dave. Now she and Dave live in California.

I take a chocolate and say to Sigalit, "I told your mother: Look at me. I've come here, and I like it despite the impossibility of everything. People are always moving. My father's in Florida, my aunt and uncle are in L.A., my students are in south Tel Aviv. So I'm here and Gideon's over there and though it might not be what you want, it kind of evens things out. Overall it's a wash."

Sigalit lets out a whistle and takes down two mugs. "Well, I owe you. Anything you want, just say the word."

Across the hall, back in my apartment, I email my mother to say I won't be returning to the States in June after all and to ask when she's coming to visit. Then I go to the window. It's already dark. Two African men are walking quickly along Ben Yehuda Street in the direction of the bus station, carrying plastic bags of groceries. Maybe they're dishwashers like Issa. Or cleaners like Yohannes. Or have something on a factory floor like Habib. Soon after Carla and Dave moved away, my mother told me she'd long suspected her sister of playing around but had never

put that together with my father. Though it was right there under her nose, she said. Her whole professional life had been spent viewing wrecks, but this one she couldn't see. Though maybe it was just as well, she added. It was bad enough losing her husband. To lose her sister at the same time would have been terrible, even if she had to lose her a year later. Sometimes you can't take it all in at once.

The men walk purposefully, heads down. The evening is warm but there's a sea breeze, and their cotton shirts billow, puffing out their slender frames. Soon they're joined by dozens more—secretaries leaving the office, laborers packing it in for the day, university students with backpacks stuffed with books, everyone thinking of the meal that awaits or the family around the table or the soft spring night ahead, and I watch the two men with the plastic bags, their dark forms gliding swiftly down the twilight street, wondering if they too are thinking of home.