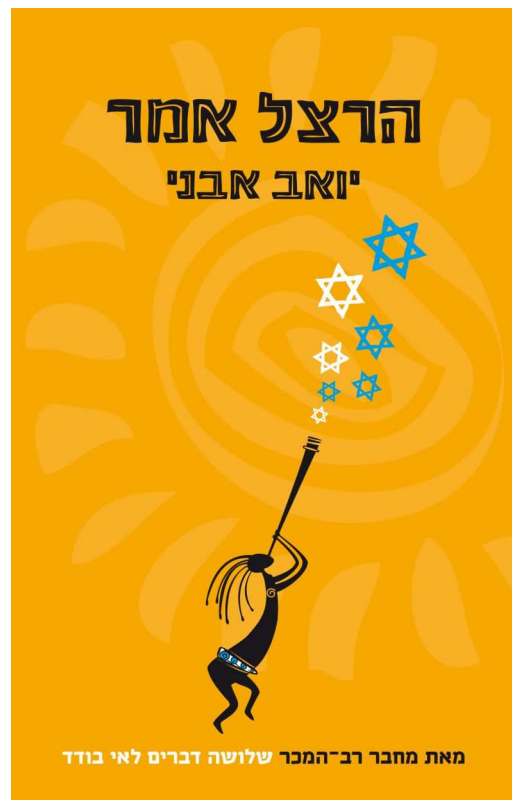


# What If / Yoav Avni

**A Book synopsis**

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## A Book synopsis

Historic background: In 1903, an offer was made by British Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain to Theodore Herzl's Zionist group – a Jewish state on 5,000 square miles of the Mau Plateau in what is today Kenya and Uganda. The offer was a response to pogroms against the Jews in Russia, and it was hoped the area could be a refuge from persecution for the Jewish people. The idea was brought to the Zionist Congress at its sixth meeting in 1903 in Basel and there, a fierce debate ensued. In the end, the offer was rejected and in 1948 the state of Israel was established in its current position. But, what if....

What if the Zionist Congress accepted the offer and Israel was born in East Africa instead of the Middle East?

What if (Herzl Amar - An Hebrew version of Simon says) is the third novel of the Geffen award winner Israeli writer and translator Yoav Avni. It's an alternative history novel, which explores both Israel and Palestine in a new, funny and bright light.



**Yoav Avni** was born in Israel in 1969.

His first book, a collection of short stories entitled "Those Strange Americans" was published in 1995 by Tamuz Publishing House. Stories were translated into English by the American magazines Zeek and Words without borders.

His first novel, "Three Things for a Desert Island" (*Shlosa Devarim le'iy Boded*) was published in 2006 by Kinneret-Zmora-Bitan Publishing House. The novel describes the journey of an Israeli high-tech salesman to a fictional island located in the Indian Ocean. "Three Things for a Desert Island" became a bestseller in Israel and is considered a cult book among Israeli backpackers. The book was nominated for the 2006 Geffen Award.

Avni's second novel "To Be" (*Ha-chamishit shel Chong Levi*) was published by Kinneret-Zmora-Bitan in 2009 and Won the 2010 Geffen Award. "To Be" is a speculative novel whose action takes place in the summer of 2017 in Israel.

His third novel "What if" (*Herzl Amar*) was published by Kinneret-Zmora-Bitan in 2011. The novel assumes that the Uganda plan suggested by the British to Herzl in 1903 was accepted by the Zionist congress and Israel was established in East Africa. In 2010 Avni translated to Hebrew Charles Kingsley's "The Water Boys". In 2012 He will translate "Watership Down" by Richard Adams.

Yoav Avni's writing is influenced by authors like Tom Robbins, Douglas Adams and Kurt Vonnegut.

## "What If" - Selected Reviews:

“Avni brings all the qualities that made *Three Things for a Desert Island* such a sweet and delightful hit: the captivating humor, the abundant linguistic inventions, the accurate emotional touches, and the broad gamut of human observation. His African Israel is described in an impressive wealth of detail... a country of vast and welcome imagination.” (Ran Bin-Nun, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 14.12.11)

“Witty, clever, and thought-provoking.” (Ariel Schnabel, *Makor Rishon*, 06.11.11)

“Avni has a vivid imagination. In fact, he has already proved this in his previous books. As a reader, it seems to me that he simply enjoys writing, enjoys creating order in the absurd, and chaos from order. Pure entertainment.” (Kobi Kamin, *Globes*, 06.12.11)

“A reading experience of laughter and pure enjoyment... A fascinating, imaginary and thought-provoking look at our life as it is and as it’s not.” (Yael Peri, *Maariv Lanoar*, 12.12.11)

“Yoav Avni is a remarkable, creative, and challenging writer. He holds up a mirror in front of Israeli reality that enables us to observe ourselves from a distance. The plot is unique and interesting and there’s never a dull moment! Warmly recommended.” (*People of the Book*, 08.01.12)

"Filled with lots of tongue-in-cheek humor. An interesting idea that was well investigated." (Adi Shtamberger, *Jerusalem Post*, 30.11.11)

# What If

**By Yoav Avni**

**Translation Sample**

**Translated from the Hebrew by Margalit Rodgers**

Yoav Avni  
[yoav.avni@gmail.com](mailto:yoav.avni@gmail.com)  
<http://yoavavni.wordpress.com/>

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*I was thrilled to find Jewish settlers in this place, in the jungles, among savage Negroes and wild animals, Jews living primitively in mud huts and preparing to settle here, create a new life and change the face of creation.*

Nachum Wilbusch, *The Journey to Uganda* (p. 56)

## 1

Trunk or cannon?

There! Something lumbered slowly across the border, and Kfir hesitated –  
Elephant or tank?

It was hard to make out. The sun withdrew into dusk over the savannah, and in its peacock-colored light it seemed to Kfir that even the Shields of David changed their color every few minutes. The fluttering blue dimmed into purple, flared into red, and filled with orange.

He strained his eyes and again scanned the horizon that glistened from the long August rains. His best friend wasn't much help. "Don't mobilize the whole sector for no good reason," he said.

Six till ten, the easiest guard shift of all, their last, and Ari insisted on breaking all the rules this time too – he didn't even bother to look through the binoculars, and from where he sprawled on the concrete floor atop the watchtower, he was sure it was just an elephant. "We're being discharged tomorrow, remember?"

Kfir remembered (of course he remembered), but his discharge – even the word – was as mysterious and ambiguous as that lone object in the distance.

Discharge from...? Discharge to...? It was hard to make out, and he permitted himself, just this once, to put off what he could till tomorrow. Kfir brought his eyes to the eyepieces and focused. His gaze stretched to the south – over the state flags and the tile roofs of Kfar Darom, over the Maasai refugee camps encircling the Strip settlements, over the security fence.

He scanned the demilitarized zone that stretched from the border with Tanzania up to the distant cluster of acacias. Behind them hid the elephant, or perhaps the tank – the binoculars didn't reveal anything, and rounded the corners of reality.

"D'you think we should report?" he asked, giving the two-way radio a thorough inspection.

"I think we should find the mosquito repellent," Ari replied, and took off his combat harness. "I forgot to put some on and it'll be dark soon. I have no intention of going back home with malaria." He stood up and grabbed the steps of the ladder. "Back in minute."

“Wait!” Kfir called out to him, “There’s some here. You don’t want to get caught today of all days.”

Ari sat down on an ammunition box and examined the spray his friend handed to him. “Apple-cinnamon? The smell of this stuff doesn’t come off.”

“That’s all the quartermaster had.”

“And there’s not much left,” he remarked, shaking the container.

Kfir resumed observation. He put his eyes to the binoculars. His arms encircled the base, his fingers slowly turning and adjusting the focusing wheel.

“What about you?” Ari asked.

“I’ve already put some on.”

“I meant in general.” Ari rolled up his sleeves and started spraying his arms. “I, for instance, wouldn’t insist on that position with the binoculars. You do know it’s not coming with us tomorrow, right?”

“Get serious.”

“I am serious, bro. It’s you who’s insisting on looking for tanks on the trees.”

“We’re on guard duty, Ari, so I’m guarding.”

“Guarding what exactly? The border? Haven’t you got it yet that that’s not why we’re here? For the thousandth time – we’re only here because of the settlers.”

“So for the thousandth time plus one – they’re citizens just like me and you,” said Kfir, “and they’re not the problem. No one’s forcing the Mambo-Jumbos to send booby-trapped goats and hide behind children. They’re the ones who set ambushes with poison warheads on their spears and cow shit, not us.”

“And rightly so, if you ask me. They’re nomads and because of us they can’t nomad. If I were occupied here, like them, I’d also try to...” Ari squashed a mosquito that landed on the back of his hand. “See? More suicide attackers. Was it worth it?” he reprimanded the crushed carcass. “Whatever, all this will be resolved soon enough.” He sprayed again and handed the container back to Kfir.

Everything will be resolved soon enough – Kfir tried to imagine how, and couldn’t. He wasn’t sure if Ari was referring to the Disengagement Plan or their approaching trip, and he didn’t like the way his friend talked about the residents of the Strip. There’s nothing to be done – Africa was the cradle of civilization, not Herzl’s registered patent. When the first waves of immigrants arrived, their new neighbors



didn't say hello or offer a cup of cane sugar. It's easy for a Tel Avivian like Ari to forget there were Maasai before us in his city too, lots of them. But Kfir didn't say anything. Political arguments played tricks with him, and he usually found himself advocating the opposite opinion of whoever happened to be speaking without actually remembering how he got there – conversations with Ari pushed him to the right, and with his brother, for example, to the left.

But none of that really matters right now, he thought, we're still soldiers, at least until tomorrow, or until proven otherwise, and until ten tonight the horizon was their responsibility – with its tanks and elephants. Kfir resumed observation. He liked guard duty – the borders of the sector imbued his world with meaning. They marked the line separating what is and what could have been.

The sky changed its skin, and the night was filled with spots of stars. The trees across the border turned black, sprouting confusing shadows. The binoculars didn't stand a chance. "I'm requesting flares," he announced.

"Pity, you'll dazzle the elephant," Ari said. "Forget it, mark my words." He drew his IDF-issue machete from his combat harness and started slicing the mango he'd smuggled into the tower. "What time is it anyway?"

"Two more hours," Kfir yawned against his will. His eyelids pulled down. He pulled back. He took out a canteen and drank until it was empty.

"So you can take it easy. Nothing's going to happen here before the evacuation."

Kfir remained silent. His father would have corrected him and said 'uprooting'.

"Everyone's waiting," Ari leaned back. "Everyone wants to see how we lie in the bed we made here." He wiped the wide blade on the harness and stood up, "Now take a break and let me take over on the binoculars for a while. You probably can't see anything now anyway." He handed him the sliced mango with a smile, "Something orange?"

Kfir didn't smile. Well, maybe a little. Ari assumed it was hereditary, but Kfir wasn't really one of the 'oranges' – he wasn't worried that the disengagement would bring down calamity on Israel or prove to the Maasai that it really was possible to throw all of us to the crocodiles, and despite that, every time he looked out from the tops of the watchtowers at the settlements scattered throughout the Strip – intractable

rows of straight stone houses in the heart of an exploding chaos of makeshift huts made from straw and cattle dung – a sense of shared destiny ripened in him.

It was indeed an uprooting, a geographic root canal. If the Strip was a mouth, no matter which of Israel's governments was responsible for opening it to the Devil, then the square white houses were teeth, and no one would hesitate to call the disengagement that. Uprooting. And he too was about to be uprooted – his guard duty would come to an end, then shower, floss, to his frugal room and a quick read before sleep crept into his bed and placed a pillow over the face of the departing day. His consciousness would fumble its way through the dark tunnel stretching between the last minutes of every day, and what then?

Kfir was apprehensive about the blind date with civilian life. He didn't know if it was really waiting for him, as it was for Ari, or whether it would be there simply because he happened to be the right age. And tonight, now that all the days of his army service had finished counting off before him, he felt that even the settlers still had more time, whereas tomorrow he would become the spearhead of the whole disengagement. His base was his castle, his guard shifts guarded him in return.

"Remember why elephants have tails?" Ari suddenly asked, and resumed sprawling on the floor of the tower.

Kfir hurried to the abandoned binoculars and switched over to night vision. In the starlight the distant acacias resembled phosphorous thumbtacks and looked as though they fixed the soil of the savannah in its place. Thus too the baby elephant that now stood on the stretched horizon between its parents.

"So they don't end just like that." Ari completed the riddle and rolled another mango out of his harness. He was his best friend. He skipped the "I told you so."

## 2

Ari spent the remaining half hour standing. He unwrapped a packet of chocolate Zuckerbergs, and they chewed silently.

“Yours really taste the best,” Kfir conceded.

“The greatest!” Ari agreed. “My father says we make more from these cookies in a month than all the savories put together in a quarter.”

Kfir stared at the sky and the swathe of stars emanating from it. The watchtower positioned him between heaven and earth, and he filled his lungs with the humid southern air, so different from its northern counterpart. The distance from Maoz Agam ruled out weekend leave, so he only got to see his parents when he could get an army flight up north – about once a month, and even less than that of late. Ayala was studying to be a teacher at the Strip College, and Kfir had already turned down two flights one after another for her.

“I’m glad I’m keeping you on the ground,” she told him after the first one. He probably should have taken the second flight, perhaps it would have delayed the inevitable, but Kfir didn’t regret it, not even now. He remembered that weekend, that bad, broken weekend when he insisted on clinging to their relationship despite the coldness gusting from Ayala. He remembered the chilling silences and the sting of disappointment. He knew he was making a mistake even then, but what is a magnet to do when faced with a refrigerator door?

Nature celebrated before them, food chains adorning its inflated chest, and predators’ eyes glimmered beyond the binocular lenses. Kfir listened to the choir of savannah crickets – their number identical to the number of stars in the sky according to Maasai legend – knowing they were merely fulfilling their function. If only he knew with as much confidence what his function would be when the final guard shift came to an end.

Ari handed him another cookie. “Bro, I know you’re capable of getting depressed from just about anything,” he said, “but don’t tell me now too. We’re getting discharged and off we go – just like you wanted, remember?”

That wasn’t accurate – it isn’t depression, Kfir thought, and it’s not from anything. His gaze was fixed on the horizon, although right now there was nothing to hang onto. Random shouts in Swahili bounced in the distance, and apart from a few isolated

bonfires, the refugee camps were blanketed in darkness. By contrast, the lights of Kfar Darom were soft and yellow, and beyond the Mara River, Neve Baobab and Netzarim also glimmered. The college dorms couldn't be seen from here, and maybe that's a good thing, he thought. What you can't see, won't dazzle you.

The yards of the settlers' homes were filled with crates and containers, turning the lawns yellow, and the smell of cardboard boxes and adhesive tape drifted in the air.

"Do you really think that in three weeks time all this will be demolished?"

"I really think it's the right move," Ari replied, "and I actually do believe this prime minister for a change." Kfir knew that his father would make a point of mentioning that this prime minister had also promised that Netzarim would be as safe as Tel Aviv. "And anyway," Ari added, scratching himself, "don't forget that when the disengagement begins we'll already be far away from here. We'll see it all on the news. Maybe."

Kfir hadn't forgotten (of course he hadn't forgotten), after all it was he who had suggested to Ari that they bring their flight forward, but when he tried to imagine them far away from here, he couldn't. Or even the next day that would be packed with the regiment commander's summary, the feel of their discharge papers at the processing base, and the long trip to Maoz Agam and his father, and his mother. Home. Homes.

Now Kfir scratched himself too, and they stood like that, two knights-in-training in apple-cinnamon armor facing the humming night.

"Bro, didn't we say you were going to take off that idiotic beard?" Ari finally asked.

"We said by the time we're discharged, she's still got a few more hours."

"You called her, didn't you?" Ari was good at these things. "You shouldn't have."

"We booked a lodge at Baringo a month ago for this weekend. She was supposed to wait for me tomorrow at Kissufim – I had to call."

"There's no 'had to' – there's couldn't help yourself."

"This isn't a good time to quote me."

"You shouldn't have called," Ari repeated, "and it's time you stopped this grieving."

“I didn’t say I was griev...” the beard itched, “it doesn’t matter anymore now. I cancelled the lodge.”

“Did you get a refund at least?”

“There’s always a cancellation fee.”

“You could have gone on your own,” Ari said, “without the beard,” he stressed.

“What would I do there on my own?” A pink flash – an endless carpet of mocking flamingo pairs on the lake shore stunned him.

“You might have met someone. There are others besides her.”

“I’m not like you when it comes to these things,” Kfir said, “you know I’m not.”

A minute passed before Ari asked, “All right then, what exactly did she say to you?”

“Ayala?” Kfir thought he’d never want to talk about it, but now he discovered he was glad he’d been asked. “That she’s sorry but nothing’s changed, that this isn’t it, and something annoying about timing and that what’s supposed to happen happens. And something even more annoying about thinking she needs to be with someone who’s more like her.”

“Like her? Bullshit,” Ari declared, “opposites attract.”

“You’ve never seen her.”

“It’s universal, bro.”

“I don’t know. I don’t even know if we were alike or different. D’you know, one Friday,” he wanted to tell him about their second date – they’d seen a movie at Cinema Palace and when they came out they found a small, abandoned wood cabinet near the station and decided to take it with them to Kfar Darom. He wanted to tell him he’d felt like a bird building its nest – contentment and belonging and power and warmth and a connection with the good, wise, furnishing cosmos. There was something so stable about her, and tangible, and she still left. “Never mind,” he changed his mind. “She also said she’s keeping her fingers crossed for me, and she wants us to stay friends, and I should write to her after we leave.”

“And...?”

Kfir shrugged. “Maybe. I told you I intend to write a kind of journal anyway. What difference does it make if I keep it to myself or it gets sent somewhere?”

Ari's arms dropped in disappointment and a hint of apple-cinnamon wafted through the watchtower. "D'you know what my father did right after he came out of the army? He worked in the mailroom at Whitman's. I'll let you read his biography." Ari kept the book in his room. "He describes how humiliating and banal it was."

"What's that got to do with me?"

"Is that what you want? To work in someone's mailroom? How long did you even date her? Two weeks? Two months?"

"And a half."

"Mark my words, bro, don't make that mistake." 'Mark my words' was Ari's secret weapon. "And if you want to write from out there, then start a blog or something."

"A blog, how? I don't think we'll have internet. We'll be traveling from place to place most of the time."

"You mean we'll be driven. I can't believe I agreed to an organized trip."

"Don't start that again. It was the most reasonable I could find over there. It's a done deal, isn't it?"

"It is, it's a done deal. What time is it?" Ari stretched, inviting their discharge to start speeding toward them, toward the inevitable reunion.

"Four minutes."

"Did you happen to check who's taking over from us?"

"Zvi and Eyal."

"Levi or Yanai? That 4-F Levi is capable of coming late even tonight."

"Yanai," Kfir replied. "Tell me something, have you told your parents yet?" He was under the impression that Ari talked to them about everything. Maybe the divorce made all the difference. Maybe the money.

"I told them I was flying out with a friend, but they still think it's only for the launch. They don't know about the trip."

"And mine still think we're doing the Equator," said Kfir. "Is there any chance they won't let you go so close to being discharged?"

Ari smiled. "It doesn't work like that with us. Although my mother won't be happy about it, that's for sure. She didn't want me to fly out there in the first place. She'd rather the launch was in Oxford. The army too, come to think of it."

“So maybe she’ll be pleased because it’s an organized trip.”

“It’ll only worry her even more. She’ll want to see the itinerary and go over every detail. Here.” Ari split the last cookie with his friend. “We’ll each worry about our own.”

Easy to say, Kfir thought, harder for someone who wasn’t born with a Zuckerberg spoon in his mouth. He knew his parents wouldn’t stand in his way. On the contrary, they’ll even be happy for him in two different ways that’ll leave him sad and frustrated. He tried to imagine himself there in less than two weeks – beyond the mountains, beyond the darkness – and couldn’t. Or the takeoff or landing, and the foreign weather.

The Lonely Planet he read every night said there was no time difference – the time in Palestine would be identical to the time in Israel. He glanced at his watch. That means it’s one minute to ten there as well.

That calmed him, for a moment.

### 3

She looked at Ari.

The secretary could have gone on staring at Staff Sergeant Ari Zuckerberg all day. He made her think about bed linen. She tried to imagine what he'd look like a few months from now, as a civilian, and bet on a Tel-Avivian version of Jude Law – thick, curly, sun-bleached hair and that smile that scattered an apple-cinnamon aroma around her. And bed linen.

Actually, she thought, the floor would do just as well. She glanced at the bland carpet on the office floor, measuring it, and her heart pounded in her bra.

As for Kfir, who was sitting on Ari's right, she didn't particularly dwell on his future. He looked like someone she'd fix up with one of her good friends – nice, or harmless, and actually, she thought, it's the same thing.

The sudden ring of the telephone rolled up the carpet and hurriedly folded up the bed linen.

"Yes," she answered, "two for a discharge talk. Zuckerberg," she looked at Ari, "and..." now she needed the form, "Wilman. The regiment commander wants you to go into his office," she looked at Ari. "Take the forms in with you," she looked at Ari.

\*

Colonel Re'em Douani moved his wheelchair slightly when they came in. He rose a little, and patted with satisfaction the artificial scales of the stuffed crocodile head mounted on the wall. Yesterday had marked a year since the incident, and in the past week he'd felt stronger. He'd even resumed joking ("So I told him, it's true, but don't forget, lies don't have a leg to stand on either!"). Kfir had been on weekend leave when it happened. He was picking up his clean laundry from his mother when the report about the terrorist attack in the Strip vanquished the romantic comedy she was watching in the living room. With the news broadcast came the phone ringing to call him back, and his father had driven him to the train station with his younger brother's envious eyes accompanying them. On the way his father had called the wounded regiment commander a "national hero".



Now they saluted, and Ari hissed, “Last but one.” This morning, when they’d saluted at the end of the discharge talk with the battalion commander, before they’d joined the guarded convoy to the regiment, he’d reminded Kfir, “Two more.” He’d been counting them down since the beginning of the week.

The regiment commander waited until the forms had been placed on his desk, and motioned for them to sit down.

“How are you, Wilman?”

“I’m fine, sir.”

“Our last meeting was under happy circumstances. The certificate of merit was well deserved.”

An aerial photograph occupied most of the space behind the colonel. Kfir located Kfar Darom and the watchtower they had manned last night, and traced a straight line between it and the Strip College dorms. In the photograph all the rooms were dark. The line wasn’t particularly long, but the scale was missing.

“This isn’t it,” she’d said, not knowing what she’d done. The short, nuclear sentence had split his congenital loneliness atom, leaving only fallout behind it. “This isn’t it” was a sentence in the wake of which nothing can grow other than mutated emotions. A destructive sentence of the iniquitous “Kfir, Ze’evi, come into the living room, please. Mom and I need to tell you something” family.

This isn’t it. A sentence that leaves no room for what if. He wasn’t angry with her – she hadn’t promised him anything. It was he who’d fantasized about where they’d live and how they’d fill their life together with the warm quiet required for routine to grow: Him in the yard and Ayala marking papers – one hand braiding a strand of hair and then undoing it, the other holding the red pen, bringing it to her mouth and then moving it away. It was he who’d been premature. There was no point in it – Ayala was looking for someone like her and different from him. Good thing he won’t be here soon. Good thing he’s going away.

He followed the twisting Mara that crossed the Strip from north to south. Kfir had a first-hand acquaintance with the river – its two banks frequently covered with tank tracks and army bootprints, the sewage flowing uninterrupted from the refugee camps – sewage and chemicals used to prepare cheap explosives and building materials – but despite that, in the aerial photograph the Mara looked tranquil and graceful. If

Sharon's disengagement ("uprooting", his father patiently corrected him in his mind) leads to peace after all, perhaps the area could be turned into a nature reserve – giraffes, elephants, tourist groups, and herds of buffalo will cross the borders in the big migration and wash over the savannah in their passing. Hippos will flap their small candy-like ears, and water fowl will dot the landscape like pink and white Zuckerberg marshmallows.

On the wall, under the aerial photograph, smiled Chief Natero Kop – top of the most wanted list, the black Moby Dick of every IDF Captain Ahab, and the man directly responsible for the deaths of fifty Israelis, and hundreds of wounded, including the charge that blew apart the regiment commander's jeep and cost Douani his legs. The photograph was particularly bad. His shúkà – the traditional Maasai sheet worn by the tribal chief – was red like an open wound, the two missing teeth on his lower gum opened a gaping black well, and earrings as grim as though they'd been condemned to death by hanging dangled from his torn earlobes. Kfir knew it was the Maasai way, but sometimes he thought the Mambo-Jumbos insisted on adhering to all those customs that actually played into the hands of the radical right wing with regard to the disengagement ("uprooting!" his younger brother fumed). The chief sported the two famous, heavily beaded bandoliers across his chest.

"It's not easy being discharged." Douani unintentionally managed to accurately capture the feelings of one of his men. Ari glanced at Kfir's watch. They had a six-hour journey ahead of them to Kiryat Dor where they would hand in their IDF ID cards and have their civilian ID cards, which they had handed in three years ago, returned to them. On the way he told Kfir he hoped they wouldn't be landed with emergency reserves mobilization orders and their flight would be grounded. The base buzzed with warnings of a civilian uprising that would erupt as soon as the bulldozers began biting into the settlers' homes.

Civilian life burned in his friend's bones, but Kfir felt he didn't have enough oxygen to feed his excitement at being discharged. There aren't infinite possibilities, he thought, there's only one – the one that's taking place. The arbitrary one. The one that may be happening, is happening, did happen. The one he now avoided imagining and looking over its shoulder.

Douani found his pen. "Zuckerberg?" he read from the top of the page.

Ari stood up, restraining himself from hopping up and down.

“Wilman,” he looked at the form. “I see your family’s from Maoz Agam.”

“Yes.” He hoped the page had been spared the divorce.

“So, what are your plans? To go home and help out on the farm?” Homes, Kfir corrected him soundlessly and passed his hand over his smooth cheeks. Last night they’d still been encased in a beard. “And then a discharge party? A trip? I mean, your lot don’t pass on the escape.”

Ari didn’t notice, but Kfir recognized the reprimand in Douani’s smile. “We’re flying out in a week and half,” he pointed to Ari and then to himself, and then to Ari again.

“Where to?” the regiment commander asked.

“The Middle East. Palestine.”

“Pleasure?” the regiment commander asked.

“And business,” Ari added. “A launch.” There was pride in his voice. “I’m representing our consortium.”

“Remind me?” Douani ordered.

“Confectionery. Zuckerberg Chocolate.”

“The ad of the boy with the cookie tree and the giraffes is yours?”

“It is.”

“Nice,” said the regiment commander. “Where in Palestine?”

“All over,” said Kfir, “it’s a trip called ‘Authentic Palestine for Young People’.” Ari rolled his eyes. Kfir didn’t like the name either, but the itinerary looked good. And the price was reasonable. “The good thing about this trip,” Ari squirmed in his chair, but Kfir wanted to explain, “is that after twelve days you go to a farm and work there before going on. It reduces costs considerably.”

“And where is this farm?”

“Al-Ja’una. Two hours north of Yaffa.”

Although booking two places on ‘Authentic Palestine for Young People’ had been Kfir’s idea, Ari had needed more than one ‘mark my words’ to persuade him to divert their destination. At first Kfir had thought of the Equator – not particularly original and they wouldn’t be the first, that much was true, but he didn’t want to explore the world – the outside was mapped. The inside wasn’t. His plan was that they’d rent an

off-road vehicle and take off. With a vehicle like that, encased in a steel frame with a window, they could cross the border to Tanzania, bypass Uganda from the south, and gallop westward across the dunes through Congo and Gabon, with the GPS intoxicated by the famous latitude, by the absolute zero. Weeks of driving, a whole continent from end to end, all the way to the salty smell of the sea. All the way to the Atlantic.

“Don’t miss al-Quds,” the regiment commander ordered, “it is, after all, Jerusalem. Every Jew should visit it, in my opinion – us Israelis too. Just take into account that it’s a very expensive city. My brother-in-law was there not long ago – he had a great time.”

“We’ll be passing though al-Quds as well,” Kfir said.

“That’s where my launch is,” Ari added.

“Palestine,” the regiment commander summed up, “very nice. Not a routine destination for young people.”

Ari looked pleased by this assertion. It was more or less what he’d said to Kfir about a month ago, when he’d invited him to join him – right before he added his ‘mark my words’.

There was a knock on the door, and the secretary came in. “The chopper’s waiting for you,” she informed the regiment commander and looked at Ari. Douani’s desk is also an option, she mused, wrapped in the regimental flag.

Thunder split the sky. The regiment commander looked out of the window. Plump drops trickled down the pane. “The rainy season is longer than usual this year, eh?” he asked rhetorically. “It’s the middle of August, and outside it’s like the beginning of May.” If he’d been able to, he’d have stood up now and gone outside – navigations, opening up a route, locating wanted fugitives – anything. He wheeled himself back behind his desk. Kfir saluted. Ari immediately followed suit. “Last one,” he signaled.

“Wilman,” the regiment commander said before they left, “stay for a moment please.”

“We’re one of the three companies with the highest growth rate in the food industry in the past year and all he can remember is the giraffes?” Ari grumbled at the bus station.

“But that means the ad was a success, doesn’t it?”

“What did he want?”

“He asked me about signing on,” Kfir replied, “he asked if I wanted to go on an officers course. He said the army will be facing difficult challenges after the disengagement.” Ari waited. “I told him I’d already promised to go, that we’ve already got our plane tickets, and I can’t.”

“That’s right,” Ari said, and offered his friend a handful of colorful powdered sweets. He looked relieved.

“Where’s this from?”

“Here, from the machine. I didn’t even know we sold in the regiment as well.”

“Isn’t it weird for you to buy them? You must have cupboards full of them at home.”

“It’s only three shillings. And I’m not at home.” He wiped the crumbs from his phone screen.

“Are you going to call her?” Ari had exchanged numbers with the secretary before they’d left the office.

“This isn’t it, but I’m going to write her a journal from over there.”

“Don’t be such a crocodile,” Kfir said, “what’s her name anyway?”

“Gisele.” Ari glanced at his cellphone. “Gisele Three, actually,” he smiled. “It’s all a matter of timing.”

## 4

About a month earlier, toward the end of one of their guard duties, Ari told him about the launch for the first time and suggested Palestine.

Kfir wanted to know more about the trip.

“Short. Three or four days. I don’t feel like going to that godforsaken hole on my own.”

“What are you supposed to do there?”

“A launch. It’s simple – you shake hands and pose for photographs. There’s also a speech apparently. My dad asked me to go in his place. He says it’ll be my baptism of fire.”

Baptism of fire? Kfir thought it was a wild exaggeration. “I don’t know,” he said. “When is it anyway?”

“Early October. Staying in a hotel. All expenses paid by the company. What’s there to know?”

“It’s not what I planned.” Kfir had intended to work during September and save up half of the rental for a second-hand off-road vehicle and then – the Equator.

“I know what you planned, bro. We planned it together, but the Equator isn’t going anywhere, mark my words. And it’s only in October,” he reminded him. “You can work all of September. And if we still want to go there, we can do it afterward.”

“You’re starting your studies. You won’t have time to really travel.”

“Then let’s really travel.”

“Where?”

“In Palestine. We’ll find something to do there. And anyway, everyone goes to the Equator. This is an opportunity for something different – the world isn’t full of them, mark my words.”


In the bookstore in Kfar Darom he found a used copy of Lonely Planet. After the final project that exempted him from the history matriculation exam, Palestine wasn’t completely foreign to him. Kfir knew that his great grandfather had attended the Seventh Zionist Congress at the turn of the last century in Basel that had discussed the recommendations of the delegation to Africa. The pogroms in Russia had compelled Herzl to find an available refuge for his people, and the delegation had been asked to

inspect the area being proposed for the Jews in the east of the continent, and it returned to Europe with clear-cut, positive conclusions. After stormy debates, and on the strength of a single vote, it was decided to adopt the Uganda Plan for Jewish Settlement in Africa, and the rest is history. Kfir knew that his great-grandfather ardently supported Herzl and voted in favor of the plan. He suspected that his great-grandfather had been the single vote. Thanks to or because of him – depending on who you ask and in which of the two homes you happen to be, Palestine was abandoned, and the Wilman family too came to Israel and was housed in the north, like many other immigrants who were sent to the Spear and Sickle settlements.

He found al-Quds in the Lonely Planet, and even the location of the hotel where the launch was to be held. On one of the following pages he came across the Al-Mukhtar Tours ad.

“Look,” he showed Ari the tour route on the computer at the base. At the bottom of the page a man in a lustrous silk shirt crossed his hands next to a minibus.

“‘Authentic Palestine for Young People’, bro? Are you serious?”

Kfir nodded. He’d expected resistance. “There’s also ‘Classic Palestine for Families’, ‘Magical Palestine for Lovers’, and a ‘Palestine for Hasidim kage’.” There’s more. It’s the best one I could find.”

“And who’s he?”

“His name is Mokhsein. He’s the guide and the driver. That’s what it says. Look,” he navigated to the photo section and presented his friend with proof from years ago: Mokhsein, landscape, minibus, and a panorama of smiling Scandinavian women.

Kfir hadn’t been infected with the blond rush typical of many, Israeli or Maasai, but it seemed that in the pictures the fair-haired Scandinavian women shared a single, calming and frivolous consciousness. “It says people from all over the world take this trip.”

“There are Scandinavian women in Scandinavia. There’s no need to go all the way to Authentic Palestine for Young People for that. And organized, no less. As far as I’m concerned we can fly next week to Oslo, Stockholm, Copenhagen – you choose – and from there to the launch.”

“I’ve already told you, I don’t have the money to hop from country to country. That’s precisely why I have to work.”

“I can give you a loan, bro.”

“I won’t take even a shilling from you. That’s another advantage of this trip – after a few days we go to a farm to volunteer, and it’s deducted from the price. I read it’s very common over there.”

“I don’t volunteer.”

“So call it work – a few hours on the farm each day. It says the farm is located in one of the most beautiful parts of Palestine.”

“Who works a few hours on the farm each day?”

“Me, you, anyone else who’s in the group. See this picture,” there were wooden huts there on a hill adorned with olive trees. “They make cheese there.”

“For how long?”

“At the farm? Two weeks and two days. Then we continue with the trip.”

“We pay to work there for two weeks? That Mokhsein’s a genius.”

“We don’t only work. We’ll get to see all of Palestine – it’s not a big country. Look, this for example is from a town called Umm-Rashrash. We get there at the end, after the farm.”

Ari lingered. “Are dresses like that allowed? I was sure all the women there have to walk around with veils. And shopping? I thought they draw water all day or feed the camels or something.”

“No way. Lonely Planet says that in general it’s a very liberal country, and that Palestine is the Americans’ main ally in the Middle East.”

“All right.”

“All right? That’s it? You’re in?”

“Yes. It’s an opportunity. There aren’t many – I told you. We’ll go on this trip, bro, this is exactly what you need.” His finger tapped merrily at the feet of the Scandinavian women.

“What I need?” The day before, the breakup from Ayala had happened. Kfir looked at the picture again.

“What you need,” confirmed his friend.

“What I need?” Kfir repeated. “What you need.”

“What we both need. Mark my words.”



And from the moment the booking had been confirmed, Palestine had become the liberator of their liberation, of their discharge. A week and half from now they'd be on the plane, and six hours and forty minutes later they'd be landing. Far below them the bulldozers would be making their way to Ayala's Strip.

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The driver exchanged a few words with the soldiers guarding the Strip checkpoint, and everything was left behind – the patrols, firing zones, the spikes made from Commiphora spines across the narrow roads, fences and watchtowers, the booby-trapped goats, the spears, Ayala and the hot breaths in her room shuttered from the inside, the baby elephant and its grey but stable and undivorced parents on the horizon that they had guarded so very many times until yesterday.

Kfir loathed partings. He always thought no one understood as he did the rupture and the loss. Everyone celebrated what was to come without bowing their head over what had been, and the moments that would never again return were shoved into the time garbage compressor. At best they'll become recycled memories. A discharge party was of course out of the question – only space cadets celebrate the weightlessness and the void, and do it in front of cameras too. When they're alone they hold on tight and stare into the black nothingness reflected through the small windows, Kfir was convinced of it.

A row of transport containers waited its turn on the open ground allocated to them next to the checkpoint. They were empty now, but very soon they'd be packed with life. Whole, round, complex families would be packed into simple rectangles against their will.

Kfir wondered if his parents would use two separate containers if Maoz Agam were ever evacuated as part of a peace treaty with South Sudan. And maybe it should be forgotten that promises shouldn't be broken and accept the regiment commander's offer (but he remembered, of course he remembered). Second Lieutenant Kfir Wilman gradually disappeared into the twists of an alternative history. Every choice left an unresolved maze of lost possibilities.

The bus turned onto the highway to the capital and smoothly merged into the traffic. Lucky. All roads now led to civilian life, and Kfir felt as strange as a hitchhiker in it. He woke up three hours later, when the driver announced a short break in Beit Shemesh.

It was raining, making it difficult for the diesel engine to climb between the forested hills. From here the Maasai refugee camps looked like the south of another, alternate country, but the armored monuments along the side of the road reminded him that this was indeed Israel. Kfir knew his father had fought here in the Kenyan militias in sixty-seven. He suddenly felt hungry. And thirsty. He leafed through the book – he read every night and had even managed to learn a few basic words in Arabic.

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to remember the name of that thing we said we’d eat there right after we land. You know, that paste that’s a bit like matoke, the stuff you eat with that round bread. Here,” he showed Ari the picture, “ana bidi hummus.” He practiced in the foreign language.

“What time is it?”

“Two.”

At the entrance to Beit Shemesh the bus maneuvered and parked, and the rain stopped. “I’ve got to get a drink,” Kfir said, “want anything?”

“I’m getting off too.”

“Don’t worry, if there’s Zuckerberg I’ll buy Zuckerberg.”

“I know,” Ari smiled, “come on, my shout. Let’s see if our Grand Banana Cinnamon has already made it to this hole.”

Outside, tourists crowded around a sign announcing the crossing of the Equator and posed for photographs with one foot on one side of it and one on the other, or drew an imaginary latitude or made a zero sign and smiled – the usual clichés. Ari walked between them with a look that promised “Mark my words, we won’t be like them.”

## 5

They arrived in Kiryat Dor in the afternoon. It was Kfir's third visit to the capital, and this time too he did not feel invited, but summoned.

In other cities whose name was taken as spoils of war, something of their previous incarnation could be found – in Beit Lokichar a robe weaving workshop had been preserved, there were authentic Maasai cuisine restaurants at Mitzpe Kakamega, and a model village in New Kariko, where actors portrayed the red-swathed, cattle-herding, spear-wielding tribespeople. In Tel Aviv too there was a museum dedicated to the Kisumu ruins.

But in Kiryat Dor no trace remained of old, black Eldoret. Israel's capital constituted a precedent, and its language was uncompromising and unapologetic. The city concentrated the centers of control as though there was a powerful magnet in its navel pulling neckties, official cars, and bluetooth earpieces. At the entrance to the city a fountain gushed, and Kfir felt he was being swept up toward a civilian waterfall.

He first came to the city for a compulsory field trip to the Israeli parliament with Grade 7/A of the Pa'atey Sudan Regional Council State School (his father came along as the armed escort, and Agura, the teacher, insisted on calling him "Mister Spokesman", much to his oldest son's mortification). The highlight of the trip was supposed to be the vehement speech of Opposition Leader Shimon Peres in favor of resuming negotiations with Uganda, but like many of his classmates, Kfir too graded the speech only in second place – Peres was no competition for Ma'ayan Pinsker, whose white blouse got wet after the water fight between the boys and the girls on the lawns of HaPa'amon Park.

Kfir returned to the city years later to enlist. He remembered the parting from his parents and younger brother, and the ten meters of eternity separating the tight, multiple participant hug and the entrance to the enlistment chain. For a moment, as short as his new crewcut, they once again looked like one happy family.

Now a gaunt, unfit-for-active-duty soldier sat facing him, a flat screen between them. The discharge form spewed faintly out of the IDF printer. Ari, who'd already been given back his ID card, welcomed civilian life with a triumphant smile. For him the chain of enlistment had been unraveled in one go. Kfir looked out of the narrow

window at the whitewashed Baobab stumps that fenced the base. Who knows when he'd return to Kiryat Dor? Maybe this was the last time. He wasn't planning on working in the public service, he hadn't planned anything apart from the approaching trip, and he couldn't even imagine that.

Now he felt that his destiny resembled that of prisoners who lose their way forever on the day they are released.



It was quick – faster than an extraction or uprooting. The symbolism folded very neatly in the sign-out form signed off by the quartermaster amused Ari. For Kfir, the symbolism provided additional proof that every link in the chain of his life knows what the next link is going to be before he does.

Light rain and evening awaited them outside, and Ari talked on his cell with his parents and smiled. The rhinoceros-grey safari pants that came down to his knees and the white short-sleeved shirt accentuated his tanned skin.

They returned their monotonous uniform to the quartermaster, and Kfir knew this was a one-time opportunity to find his new clothes, but all he had were the faded jeans and creased striped shirt that had been relegated to the bottom of his backpack since that last Saturday with Ayala. When he kicked (twice) the plastic bag that floated nobly on its way, he felt that even inanimate objects were trying to intimate something to him.

After the divorce his mother became addicted to classes at the regional cultural center. After the second 'Introduction to Interior Design' lesson, she put a mirror in the hallway. "It gives you a sense that the house is bigger," she explained. "Don't you think?" Kfir answered that it was only because fewer people live in the house now. Up to tenth grade he'd been more extrovert.

Now he lingered by one of the puddles that had collected on the sidewalk and glanced into it. The sky hurried to be reflected in it, and Kfir realized his mother was right – it really does give you a sense that the world is bigger. A few steps behind him Ari laughed – his family telephone conversation was animated. He talked and he listened and went into detail and concluded with "Great. So I'll see you soon."

Kfir didn't want to hurry. He was thirsty, confused, and unprepared for what was to come. Not ready. Unripe. "You hungry?" he asked his friend.

"At home," Ari answered and raised his arm to hail a matatu to the central bus station. The air warmed up. The rain sizzled when it touched the ground. The rainy season fought for its life – soon it would lose and be replaced by its dry sister, and the whole country would turn yellow. In Palestine, he'd read, there are four seasons. Weird.

They stood on the sidewalk. The traffic was dense and slow and resembled a stew packed with pungent electricity and red lights. Kfir wiped the water off his face and looked at the vehicles flooding the road. Perhaps floating on it. In some sat couples – two by two – and the cars resembled private Noah's arks.

Since the divorce he'd made an effort to divide his time between his father and mother. To divide and add up and multiply ex nihilo. The formula was complex, and the fact they lived near each other helped a little.

He put off the two conversations with his parents, and didn't call his brother either. Kfir assumed Ze'evi would be busy with the feeding rounds on the farm or training for his enlistment next year. Dreams of the elite Naval Commandos flooded his younger brother's brain, and they didn't speak much. "So what now?" he asked.

"Now we start living, bro. Actually, first we get a cab, and then."

No matatus stopped on this side of the road, and they crossed Chamberlain Boulevard. "It's because of the game with Cameroon," Ari said when two packed minibuses drove past them. The third, almost full of blue-and-white supporters, stopped. "I don't understand how people still think we'll make it to the World Cup after the draw with Morocco," he declared as the door opened.

"We'll beat them in Rabat," Kfir said. "I believe we'll qualify in the end."

"I envy you sometimes." Ari didn't say if he meant it seriously, or if this was one of those times. "How much for two to the central bus station?" he asked, taking out a twenty-shilling bill.

"Fifteen," said the driver and handed him a five-shilling coin.

It was strange to suddenly be paying for public transport, Kfir thought. Nobody knew that until an hour ago they'd been soldiers. "I'll pay you back at the bus station. We'll buy tea or something."

“Seven and a half new shillings! You promise to pay it back?” said Ari, “Don’t make me laugh.”

The drive took forever. The swarm of supporters in the backseat continuously hummed, “El-El Israel!” and “No, no we won’t move, Cameroon’s gonna get screwed!”

Ari smiled, and Kfir was assailed by an all-embracing ‘this isn’t it’ woefulness.

Because of the traffic jams and the patronizing signage in Kiryat Dor’s central station, they only arrived at the terminal at eight-fifteen. The train to the north had already left. Ari was disappointed for his friend, but Kfir felt relieved. He wanted to stand still. To stop moving for a moment. To drop anchor between the Noah’s arks.

“When’s your next train?”

“There’s another one at midnight.”

“Only at midnight? What will you do here until then?”

“Dunno. Maybe walk around the shops.”

“Since when do you walk around shops?” Ari stretched his neck and searched, high above everybody, for the sign to Tel Aviv.

“Or maybe I’ll watch the game,” Kfir pointed to a nearby Wagamama restaurant.

“Aren’t you going to phone home?”

“I haven’t even told my parents I cancelled the lodge. They think I’m only coming on Sunday.” He shrugged.

“You know what?” Ari said (suddenly understanding), “I’m an idiot. Really. Sorry, bro – come to my place. Go home tomorrow, or on Sunday. Don’t stay here until the middle of the night. Forget the game, they’ll never beat Cameroon, mark my words.”

## 6

Ari was right – the train to Tel Aviv was fast, but the Cameroon team was even faster. A sigh passed through the passengers when the visitors scored the first goal, and murmurs of acceptance rustled through the car when the “Indomitable Lions” – as they were called in all the sport sections – scored the second even before the end of the first half. “Once again we’re letting in goals from free kicks!” the commentator lamented, and for a moment Kfir thought he was talking about him.

Earlier he’d been happy about the delay, but now he wanted the final stop to be familiar. He craved a predictable evening meal, even if he had to eat two of them – a farm egg omelet and a jug of desalinated water at his father’s, stuffed savories and fizzy drinks at his mother’s.

His eyes wandered from the TV screen to the window as he tried to find essential differences between them. He knew there had to be some, despite the impenetrable glass.

The flat tea and cotton fields were replaced by industrial zones that surrounded the metropolis, from heavy to light: first steel, rubber, and textile, and then food – meat, dough, coffee, confectionery. “There’s the plant,” Ari said, pointing to a walled fortress whose chimneys served as flags. One day all this would be his, but now all that could be seen from the train was the “berg” at the edge of the huge sign.

Only few baobabs remained here, remnants of the thousands that less than a century ago had dried the vast swamps – the pioneers had known what if. When Tel Aviv’s famous aura of light that was reflected in Lake Victoria, the one that’s depicted in all the postcards, came into view, all the factories disappeared, and the airport from which they would very soon depart for Yaffa, appeared. Then came the diamond polishing workshops, the hi-tech and biotech companies, and the buildings gradually grew in stature – evolution of the city that had emerged from the sands.

Tel Aviv piqued the locomotive’s curiosity, and its stops became more frequent. Ari tried to share names with his friend – squares, restaurants, clubs, stores – and Kfir made an effort to nod in the right places. He’d been to Tel Aviv a few times in the past, in the family vacations era. The last had been before he started tenth grade and he remembered that people at the station had spoken about the Millennium bug with a mixture of perplexity and amazement, and hoped the train wouldn’t derail. It was a

bright morning, clear as a translucent pearl, with his father and mother and brother in the train carriage, small, warm, and protective as an oyster, along the seven hundred and fifty kilometers separating Maoz Agam and Tel Aviv. When they passed Herzluna, they always used to chant in unison: “This is where Mom was born.” He liked the journey and looked forward to it every year. He still liked packing back then.

A Kikuyu chauffeur welcomed them at North Train Station. “Jumbo Ari!” he called out in delight.

Ari hugged the chauffeur and returned his greeting. “Kfir, this is Lisimba. And this is Kfir, my friend.” He didn’t explain where from.

Lisimba piled the backpacks into the trunk and asked how the journey from Eldoret had been. Most Mambo-Jumbos intentionally used the old names, and Kfir wanted to correct to “Kiryat Dor”, but restrained himself and condemned himself to silent embarrassment. He sank into the excessively comfortable backseat of the Jaguar, and felt himself disappearing into a leather quagmire, again suffering from a set piece.

On the radio, the last minutes of the game were being described, and the driver’s shaven head moved slightly with each pass. Final minute, injury time, and who would have believed it? Only two-one to Cameroon, and then a series of passes and Tinga, the only Kikuyu on the national team, scored the equalizer. The commentator roared. Lisimba rejoiced and honked his horn. Other drivers honked along with him.

“Tinga should have been put on in the first half,” Lisimba said when the game was over. “A draw isn’t enough,” he added, and Kfir discerned a tribal-nationalistic flash in the rear-view mirror. Had there been more Kikuyu on the team, his look insinuated, perhaps we/you would have won.

Although they were part of the East-African Alliance that had attacked Israel during the War of Independence, the Kikuyu refused to take part in the destruction of the Maasai and did not voice aspirations to return to the occupied land and oust the Jews. Many of them fled, some west and south to Uganda and Tanzania, together with the Rendilles on their camels, and the long-necked Turkana warriors, but most of them crossed the new border into Kenya, the neighbor to the west. Many more stayed – the Kikuyu were good losers.



Although many of them still don't stand to attention on Memorial Day and claim that the national anthem should also give expression to yearning souls that are not Jewish, and that the flag should include something of their old black-red-green-white flag, most of them were granted Israeli citizenship and thanks to them Swahili became the official second language. The Kikuyu assimilated – first into agriculture and household work, but after the unforgettable Munich Olympics, where Kipchoge Keino broke the three-thousand meter hurdles world record and won a historic gold medal for Israel, they also went into sport, and over the years into business and politics. Although the army remained off limits to them, and although they believed in the incarnation of the same god, and many of their leaders were the same, the Maasai, who were particularly bad losers – declared them collaborators and condemned them to death.

In the eyes of many, like Ze'evi for example, there was no difference: Maasai or Kikuyu – they all want to throw the Zionist entity to the crocodiles. They're all Mambo-Jumbos, and Kenya should take them with their national aspirations, cattle herds, and poisoned spears.

“We're approaching the lake. Lisimba, drive along the promenade, OK? And put on a disc. What's my dad listening to these days?”

Nordau. Montgomery. Wilbusch. Ben-Yehuda. Kings of Israel Square – he was familiar with the names, especially from the Monopoly games of his childhood. Lisimba turned left onto Commissioner Donald Stewart Promenade (back then a house on the board game cost NIS 400, and two - more than double), and Lake Victoria spread on their left to the sounds of “From the Depths”. It didn't surprise Kfir – Ari's dad listens to the hip Idan Raichel. His dad still listened to the Savannatron Choir.

Square lights were installed along the transparent, crocodile-proof security fence, and the grass-covered beaches were illuminated right up to the water's edge. Red-lettered signs cautioned against bathing and fishing in prohibited areas. Between all the Ramada Jarvis and Marriott he tried to locate the old Thunder Hotel where they used to stay in the family vacations era, but to no avail.

He'd liked the hotel. They'd arrive in the city toward midnight, and Kfir remembered how proud he'd felt when the night guard asked them how they were, and called them "the Wilmans". His mother used to say it was a good thing you can't see the lake from their rooms because it encourages you to go out and walk around. And they did.

The fish-'n-chips stalls that used to line the beach were gone now too. A capitalist fairy had turned them into stylish seafood restaurants. The promenade was bursting with people. People lived, and it seemed that for them this was exactly it.

The road climbed between the crowded highrise buildings of Ramat Victoria and Port Herzl. You could have crowded the entire population of Maoz Agam into one apartment building here, Kfir thought. In Maoz Agam there was room to spread out. Maybe too much room. If his mother had persuaded his father to buy an apartment in one of the housing estates in Herzluna after Ze'evi was born, maybe they wouldn't have gotten a divorce. Maybe they would. Alternative history, he thought. You can't live with it and you can't live without it.

Ari turned down the music. "There's a small refrigerator with drinks in the back if you're thirsty. You OK?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Why? Because-of-this-really-important-trip-to-Authentic-Palestine-for-Young-People!"

"Was that supposed to be an Arabic accent?"

"Of course," Ari answered.

"It's not." Kfir ruled.

"Then it's not. As long as the Scandinavian women are."

"Let me remind you that at first you didn't even want to go."

"Let me remind you that you persuaded me."

"Fine, but is that all you think about?"

"That too. Why," said Ari, "what do you think about?"

"Dunno. It's hard to believe this morning we were still in the Strip."

"Hard? Why har – oh, fuck! Gisele Three – I promised to call on the way." He texted her offhandedly.

When they came to Ga'ash, Lisimba slowed down. The houses became lower and began to swell. The cars remained young and beautiful, and the grass on the other side of the fence was replaced by elegant gardens. A delicate odor of chlorine wafted from the swimming pools, and sounds of lapping water echoed through the neighborhood. The big, incandescent moon made the one at Maoz Agam seem like a pale substitute.

“Would you believe there used to be a kibbutz here? My dad says that when he first came at the end of the sixties there were only tea fields everywhere. The original Whitman factory was over there, on the hill. And this is it. We're here,” Ari said, and Lisimba stopped in front of a house that made Kfir try to imagine what the opposite of rich people's problems was.

## 7

“Ari?” Probably his mother. Probably from the next room – there were lots of them. It seemed that in the Zuckerberg home there were so many possibilities.

In Maoz Agam the houses were all alike, and at his mother’s, as at his father’s, the house imposed a uniform obstacle course: front door-narrow hallway-bedrooms-living room-kitchen-utility room.

“Ari!” A young, long girl appeared from the left. She was wearing a short skirt and a tank top with a print of the British flag, and Ari received her for a long, revolving hug. Kfir managed to make out “Made in Israel” on her backside. Everything was fast and embarrassing. In Maoz Agam he had become accustomed to slow and embarrassing.

“This is Ofri,” Ari said when the hug came to a complete standstill. “My sister.” She looked the same age as Ze’evi, but since she’d grown up in Tel Aviv, Kfir assumed she was a few years younger than his brother – no more than fourteen.

“Is that it? Finished?” Ari’s mother joined them. Her shoulders were bare and her dress flattered her figure. Ari bowed his head to her, and she put her hands on his cheeks. “Congratulations, sweetheart!” Her smile was whole as she kissed his forehead, and the unripe red in Ofri’s hair ripened in hers. “Welcome,” she addressed Kfir, “Ari texted that you missed the train. I’m Divina.” Fortunately for him he was smart enough not agree with her out loud. He managed to utter “Kfir”, and they shook hands. What would have happened if his mother had dressed like that? Would history have been alternative? Would he have been different? Become better at these things? (You know, these things!)

“Is Dad home?”

“He’s in his study. I think the things for your trip have arrived.”

“Really? I’ll ask him if he needs any hel...”

“Later, Ari, all right? You haven’t seen the little one yet. There’s plenty of time. Nitzani! Ari’s back! Come inside and say hello. It’s too late for the patio! Nitzani!”

“But Mom, I’m turning night flies into butterflies!”

“She’ll be five in November,” Divina explained to Kfir.

“I’m pretend turning!” added the small but assertive voice.

“All right, but come and say hello to Ari. He’s home and he doesn’t have to go back to the army anymore! And a friend is here with him who doesn’t know you. And don’t open the yard door, I don’t want tsetses in the house!” Divina went to a wide sliding door and moved it. It seemed as though the outline of her hips remained suspended in midair. A westerly wind blew off Lake Victoria bringing with it something from the heart of the continent – smells of sodden tree bark, the fear of a chased antelope, sparkling silence from the depths of an abandoned diamond mine, echoes of a military coup.

Nitzani burst inside holding a silver wand that came in children’s packets of Zuckerberg Breakfast Cereal. A small, long-tailed monkey skipped behind her.

“No, no, no,” Divina said, “Brownie sleeps outside.”

“But Mom!”

“No buts. You remember what you promised when we took him? He’s got a climbing frame outside, and pillows and a mattress. He’s comfortable there. He’s a monkey. Now come here.” The little girl accepted the hug indifferently. When she noticed Kfir she froze, and reminded him how far he was from Maoz Agam. Ari knelt down and handed her a lollipop-shaped hair grip he’d bought in Kiryat Dor. “Where’s the previous Humi?” he whispered to his mother.

“A snake bit him,” she mouthed the words over Nitzani’s head, “I told her he was sick and went to the hospital. I brought this one from the animal shelter. He’s a mangabey. They’re supposed to stay this size. She likes him.”

“Mom, can I turn more flies into butterflies?” Nitzani asked. “Pretend turn.”

“I suggest you leave a few for tomorrow.”

“Exactly,” Ofri said, “you’ll upset the ecological balance.”

“*I won’t!*” the little girl roared. “Mom, she say...”

“Enough, Nitzani, go and call Daddy, all right? Tell him Ari’s here at last and we all want to eat.”

Nitzani ran to the study, and then ran back because she’d forgotten her wand. She ran off again, and then came back to claim the kiss she deserved because she’d tripped on the carpet and banged her knee. Then she set off again for the study, where she conducted loud negotiations. Upon their conclusion she returned with her father, her

specimen of a hand in his big one, and she divulged: “Daddy was cross with the cuter screen.”

“Computer,” he corrected her. “And I wasn’t cross. I made a few amendments in the speech for this discharged soldier! Come here!” He hugged his son, “Congratulations!” Discharged soldier. Kfir found it difficult to believe, but it was accurate.

“I want us to go over the speech. I put in a few important changes and the prototype has finally arrived. Fresh out of the box. We’ll take a look at it together.”

“But we’ll eat first,” Divina said.

“And no one thought to show me anything,” Ofri grumbled.

“It’s Ari’s trip,” her father said, “your time will come and you’ll get the hang of it. But you’re welcome to join us later.” He had an accent typical of people from the center of the country – the interval between the words was shorter. Ari talked like that too, but he was already used to Ari.

Kfir was familiar with the founder of the Zuckerberg consortium from the TV reports. When asked how he’d managed to turn sugar and chocolate into gold, he’d smiled. When he was described as a man who’d tamed his destiny to fulfill his wishes, he calmly said he still had many dreams. In real life he looked even more impressive. He’d given Ari his height, and when he stood beside his son, they looked like two torch carriers on a long-range obstacle course (Kfir and his father, by contrast, looked like cause and effect). For them an alternative history would be a colossal waste of time. They had no need for it – they lived in the best of all possible worlds.

Aliens, Kfir thought. He’d been abducted by aliens without a fight – friendly and successful ones, tall and handsome ones, some of them even exceptionally so. Aliens.

“How was the journey?”

“Fine, Dad. Thanks for Lisimba. And this is Kfir, from the army. Actually not from the army anymore. He’ll be coming with me.”

Although he hadn’t yet informed his parents about the organized tour, Ari managed to talk about the approaching trip with complete calm, as though it had already happened, but mention of the future aroused agitation in Kfir. In Divina too – her eyes scrutinized him, and Kfir felt unprepared.

“So this is the friend who’s going with you to the launch? Very good.” He turned to Kfir, “Menachem.” They shook hands. “But everyone calls me Meni.”

“I actually have a few questions about this trip,” Divina said, trying to maintain her smile, “you were pretty vague on the phone, but there’ll be time for everything. Let’s sit down.”

They followed her to the kitchen. To the end of the world. The house was much bigger than his parents’ two houses combined.

Instead of common parquet, the floor was laid with marble tiles. The ceilings were high, and illuminated in the walls were niches containing artifacts.

A black woman, a Kikuyu like Lisimba, carrying a pile of white bed linen slipped out onto the patio.

“Your room will be ready in a few minutes,” Divina told Kfir, “in the meantime have something to drink and take a shower before we eat. You must be exhausted from your journey.”

“Can we order in, Mom?” Ofri asked, “Instead of Dikeledi cooking today, all right? Can we?”

“We’ll order in,” she agreed, and Kfir realized that in this household “yes” was frequently employed. “What do you feel like having? Meni?”

“Hmm... fish.”

“Great. I’ll call Mul-Agam. Oh, do you remember that place in the square? The vegetable place?” she asked Ari, “They opened an excellent Kenyan there this week – their ugali is just wonderful.”

Just wonderful. Kfir wanted ugali. Only ugali.

“And sushi!” Ofri added.

“Kfir? What would you like? There’s also a pretty good Ethiopian.”

“Kenyan is fine.”

“But I want sushi!” Ofri repeated.

“We’ll order everything,” said Divina. “Everything.” She enveloped Ari, and his father joined in. Ofri clung to them, immediately followed by little Nitzan. From the side they looked like a group hug after scoring the winning goal in the World Cup final for families.

“And for dessert, Zuckerberg chocolate with Rice Krispies!” Nitzani said and everybody laughed.

Kfir watched them from the side.

Aliens.



## 8

“So, Ari says you’ve known each other since basic training,” Meni said.

“Yes. After that I went on an Intelligence Corps course and then came back to the battalion.”

“Intelligence? There’s an example of a commodity with an endless demand. What did you do there, if I’m permitted to ask?”

Kfir hesitated.

“A deciphering course,” Ari answered his father and released the brakes.

“Coded messages transmitted by the Mambo-Jum...” Divina didn’t look pleased, and Kfir corrected himself, “by the Maasai.” He drank some water, “I’ve got a knack for languages,” he added in embarrassment.

“It’s his inner voice that causes him problems,” Ari wasn’t mocking his friend. It was a coded ‘mark my words’.

“Mom, look how much he’s drinking!”

“**Nitzani, it’s impolite.**” Divina formed a new ball of dough between her fingers and bit into it after dipping it a fish and vegetable sauce. “And you live in Maoz Agam.”

“Yes,” Kfir said and prepared a ball of his own. The ugali really was wonderful. His mother’s excelled in quantity rather than quality (Ze’evi refused to touch Mambo-Jumbo food on nationalistic grounds), and the army’s Sunday ugali was made from coarse, bitter flour.

“Maoz Agam? Where’s that?” Ofri asked.

“A long way away,” Ari replied.

“What is it, a kibbutz?” Ofri asked.

“What’s a kibbutz?” Nitzan asked.

“It’s a place where people live, sweetie,” Divina explained.

“What, with houses?”

“With houses.”

“It’s a moshav,” Kfir explained, “on the northern tip of Lake Dayan. Near the border.”

“Oh mother,” Ofri said, “that really is a long way away.”

“Daddy, she said ‘Oh mother’,” Nitzani announced.

“Near Sde Boker, right?” Divina asked. She rolled a miniature ball for her daughter, and Kfir nodded. Her fingertips glistened with oil. “Ben-Gurion is buried in Sde Boker. We visited the museum there once, remember? When I was pregnant with Nitzani. And you...” she caressed the tiny scar on Ofri’s chin, “you got so excited over a photo of him standing on his head and immediately decided you wanted to do it too, even though we were in the middle of the desert. You weren’t prepared to wait until we got home.”

“She’s a Zuckerberg,” Meni said with satisfaction. “So how long have you been living on the moshav?”

“My parents have been there since seventy-one, when Maoz Agam was still a military outpost.” Kfir asked himself what is a Wilman. Since tenth grade there have been two different and contradictory answers to the question. “Then they worked together at the desalination plant. My mother still works there. She’s originally from Herzluna. My father was born in Be’er Bilu. He’s been in the north his whole life.”

“My production manager lives in Herzluna,” Meni said. “Prices there have risen sharply in recent years.”

“What’s the sally nation?” Nitzani asked.

“Desalination. Kfir’s lake is different to ours,” Divina explained. “Sorry, that sounds terrible. Nitzani, drink some coconut milk.”

“But what is it?” the little one persisted.

“It turning not-good water into good water,” Ari explained, “Dayan Lake is salty.”

“Yuck,” Ofri said. Nitzani joined in.

“Enough. And what does your mother do at the plant?”

“She’s in human resources.”

“Oh, interesting.”

“Mom, you don’t have to be polite. This is my best friend.”

“Ari!”

“It’s all right,” Kfir said, “I’m pretty sure my mother also thinks it’s not all that interesting.”

“Mom, you’ve got red blotches on your cheeks!”

“I know, Nitzani. It’s called blushing. Have you finished eating?”

“Dunno. But are there corcoldies there?”

“Where?” Divina asked.

“It’s crocodiles, Nitzan,” Meni corrected her.

“In his lake!” pointing to Kfir.

“Yes,” Divina replied, “there are crocodiles everywhere.”

“So why aren’t they driven away?”

“It’s their home. They were here long before us. And they’re protected.”

“But I don’t like them.”

“You don’t have to,” said Meni.

“Adimu said never-never go near the water alone. She said they can drive under the water without breathing for forty-five hours.”

“They can dive,” Divina corrected her, “and I think Adimu meant forty-five minutes. But that’s a lot too.” She stroked her little daughter’s head. “Adimu is the kindergarten teacher,” she explained to Kfir in a whisper, their heads almost touching. Almost.

“She said it takes bad luck.”

“Brings. And she’s right, Nitzani. If there’s no fence you mustn’t walk alone near lakes or streams either – heaven help anyone who does. Now, enough talk about things like that. Let’s ask Dikeledi to give you a bath.”

“But, Mommy, the desserts!”

“Bath first, then desserts, then brush your teeth, and then off to bed. Ofri, can you call her? I think she’s finished fixing the guesthouse for Kfir.”

“And in our bath?”

“What?”

“In our bath!” Nitzani repeated. “Are there any in our bath?”

“Crocodiles? No, of course not, sweetie! I’ve told you many times before, haven’t I? There are no crocodiles in the house.”

“And what does your father do there?” Meni asked.

“He’s the council spokesman.”

“Really?” Divina asked.

“I admire people like that,” Meni said, “I think Blair’s visit in the north last year tipped the balance in favor of granting guarantees. Sharon’s entire disengagement tactic gained greater legitimacy because of the British assurances of aid. Although we

in the center of the country are also committed to Ben-Gurion's vision. You know, on more than one occasion I tried to mobilize the consortium to reinforce the areas that are less ah..."

"The outlying areas, the periphery." In Divina's mouth the word turned into a sweet and airy dessert cream. Out with the dust, the dryness, the emptiness.

"For two years I've been suggesting that we bring one of our production lines back to Israel," Meni said, "why should I go on providing a livelihood for five hundred Kenyans in Mombassa? But the incentives are so minimal – it's just not economically sound."

"Oh, there you are, Dikeledi."

She came to the table hesitantly. "Take for shower, madam?"

Kfir looked at her. Ari had told him once about an unusual weekend with one of the maids when he was still in high school, and Kfir wondered, but his friend, who was really good at these things instantly understood, and signaled: "No way, bro!"

"Yes, Dikeledi. Asante," she thanked her.

"Come, my malaika," Dikeledi spread her arms, and Nitzani squealed with joy. "Shall we go? We can tell more stories about the little simba like yesterday, eh?"

"She's great," Divina said as they watched them going upstairs. "So your father is spokesman of which council?"

"Pa'atey Sudan."

"And? Are they making themselves felt these days?" Meni asked.

"The Sudanese? Not so much," Kfir replied. "The last rocket fell at the end of February. It's been quiet since then. I think Ethiopia has stopped its training flights."

"I hope it stays quiet," Meni said, "we don't need any distractions during the disengagement."

"It's not up to us," Kfir said, "or even up to the Sudanese. They're just Idi Amin puppets." And I just sound like my father, he thought.

"Two states for two nations," said Divina. "I simply don't understand why we insist on learning everything the hard way. We need to declare an end to the conflict and withdraw from all Maasai territories. Give them what's theirs so they can leave us in peace."

“And then Uganda will abandon its nuclear program?” Kfir ventured. “I don’t think so. It won’t solve all the problems. And anyway, if you ask the Maasai – Tel Aviv is theirs as well. This whole region was once Kisumu pastureland. The problem is there isn’t really anyone to talk to. Even if we managed to decide what’s ours and what’s theirs.”

“So it needs to be determined, even arbitrarily. I’m a firm believer in the disengagement. I think this move can advance us in so many ways.”

“I think at best it’ll be the same as with Tanzania,” Kfir said.

“There are worse things than a cold peace,” Divina said, and the memory of that moment with Ayala assailed him without any forewarning. The cold peace had come up on their first date -

It was the height of the wet season, and a group of rightwing women activists turned up at the checkpoint one night with hot tea for the soldiers. Ayala handed him a cup and poured one for herself. Before he had time to plan what to say, she touched his arm and asked if it doesn’t drive him crazy to stand like this for hours at a time. Kfir said that so long as there’s no shooting it’s all right, and he doesn’t have a problem with it continuing like that, and Ayala said that status quo runs counter to nature. When she added that they need to be given what for, her eyes shone. Kfir said he’s in favor of negotiations even if all we achieve is a cold peace (after she left he really regretted not saying that cold peace would slow down the generals’ metabolism rate). Ayala replied that he still had a lot to learn, and luckily she’s a student teacher. Kfir said the tea was really delicious, and Ayala said she can make more, and luckily, again, she’s free this weekend. Even now, when he closed his eyes, he still remembered the pattern of her freckles, shining and distant as the stars.

“I’d sign a cold peace right now. Every Maasai in the Strip has four or five wives, each of which has two or three children who learn to hate us as soon as they’re old enough to walk.”

“Ari’s right,” Meni agreed, “polygamy is *the* problem. Demography doesn’t stand still, and we can’t go on behaving like the owners of a villa in the jungle. The Kikuyu absorption model was a success at the time, but with the Maasai what we need is disengagement.” He sipped some wine, and Kfir followed the movement of the glass. When his father talked about the Maasai he used his hands. “I think in this case at

least,” Meni continued, “the new Sharon – not the Sudan War one – is the closest thing we’ve ever had to Ben-Gurion. Even more so than the late Rabin.”

“In my opinion, we had no business being in the Strip in the first place, but right now I’m just happy you’re out of there and unharmed,” said Divina, caressing the back of her son’s neck, “before all the chaos starts.”

“I don’t know,” Kfir said, “up close it looks a bit different. To me at least. There are good people in the Strip as well.”

“Kfir’s ex-girlfriend was from Kfar Darom,” Ari divulged, and Divina smiled. “I’m sure there are,” she said.

“I also think we need to get out of there,” Ofri said. “Even the English couldn’t oppress another nation, right, Dad?”

“Ri...” the phone rang. “Excuse me.” Meni plucked up the phone and strode to his study, “Everything’s been fixed? Excellent. Fax me. I’m standing by the machine.”

He returned to the table with his hands full. “Ready?” he asked his son, his expression launching a celebration.