
NEVLAND
ESHKOL NEVO

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About the Book

Dori’s father has gone travelling in South America and, suffering from some kind of breakdown, following the death of his wife, he goes missing. Dori sets out to find him, leaving his wife and young son at home in Israel.

Inbar is escaping from her life – from the grief that she can’t shake after her brother’s death, from the boyfriend she doesn’t love – and impulsively sets out for South America. While she’s there she meets a man who is searching for his father …

In his most ambitious novel to date, Eshkol Nevo weaves a beautiful love story with two tales: the story of the wandering Jews who came to their Promised Land in the wake of the Second World War, embodied by Inbar’s grandmother Lily’s narrative of her sea journey over from Poland, and the story of a new generation of wandering Israelis who leave again to go backpacking, perhaps hoping that the distance will allow them to see their homeland more clearly. *Neuland* is a romantic adventure, a search for a father that leads to love, and a quest for an understanding of identity and for second chances. Is it ever possible to start again? Nevo has produced a daring, epic novel that asks profound questions, but the truth and warmth of his writing make it all-consuming and irresistibly loveable.

About the Author

Eshkol Nevo was born in Jerusalem in 1971. He studied psychology at Tel Aviv University and then worked as a copywriter for eight years. Today he teaches creative writing at a number of academic institutions. Nevo has published a collection of stories, a work of non-fiction and two novels. His first novel, *Homesick*, was awarded the Israeli Book Publishers Association's Golden Book Prize (2005) and the FFI-Raymond Wallier Prize at the Salon du Livre (Paris, 2008); his most recent novel is *World Cup Wishes* (2012). Eshkol is an Israel Cultural Excellence Foundation chosen artist – one of Israel's highest recognitions for excellence in the arts.

Also by Eshkol Nevo

Homesick
World Cup Wishes

For my grandmother, Pracha Frishberg (1916–2010). If she hadn’t made the journey from there, I would not be here.

Neuland

Eshkol Nevo

Translated from the Hebrew by Sondra Silverston

Chatto & Windus
LONDON

Inbar and Dori. Missiles

To: Dori
From: Inbar
Subject: Worried about you
I found your email address on your school's website. I know we said we wouldn't write, but I also know that you were supposed to go on active reserve duty. And that makes my heart climb up into my mouth. So I just want to hear that everything's okay with you.

After that I promise not to bother you again.

To: Inbar
From: Dori
Re: Worried about you
Hi,

I'm fine. I hate to ruin the heroic image, but in the end they didn't call me up. I showed up at my unit the morning after we got home. They kept me waiting all day for the liaison officer who was supposed to decide what to do with me. Turns out that nothing's changed in the canteen. Even the drinks machine is still broken.

They sent me home in the evening and told me to be ready to be called up at any time. They've already filled their quota of spotters, but I might have to go up north later on.

How's your grandmother? Is she back to her old self?

It's a real madhouse here. My in-laws came running from the kibbutz to stay with us after a rocket landed in the dining hall, and from the minute they got here, this place turned into Neuland. General meetings, daily schedules, procedures. My sister and her kids come over a lot too because she's afraid to sleep on her own. There are mattresses in every corner like there used to be at my aunt and uncle's place in Arad during the music festival, and last night, on the way to the bathroom, I stepped on someone and I still have no idea who it was. Maybe a total stranger who took advantage of the chaos to crash here for the night. Or maybe I'm actually the stranger in this house.

It's probably pretty crowded at your place too, right?

Write to me. Even though I'm not sure it's such a good idea for us to be in touch.

Dori

To: Dori
From: Inbar
Re: Worried about you
Hi,

Did you hear my sigh of relief? Did it manage to climb over the Castel mountains and reach Jerusalem?

It's great that you replied. And it's so good that you're not there, at the front. I mean, I'm sure you're the best spotter in the army, but from my narrow and worried point of view, I hope the quota stays filled.

My place is a madhouse too!

My grandmother, to answer your question, shifts from being absolutely clear-minded to being totally confused, and in both states, she fights constantly with my mother. This is more or less what they sound like: You won't tell me what to do/I will tell you what to do/It's hot, I'm turning on the air conditioning/Air conditioning isn't healthy, Hana/Actually, it is/As healthy as living in Germany?/My boyfriend happens to be German/What did he do in the Holocaust?/I told you Mum, he was a child./So what did his father do?

And as if that isn't enough, my father suddenly showed up. They bought non-refundable tickets in advance, and the way he saw it, from Australia, 'This isn't a real war, just an operation that'll take a few days.' So they flew over, he, his new wife and my half-brother, and rented a hotel room. They come here at prearranged times so my mother can leave before they arrive. Get the picture? And I'm the one they hired to produce a radio show about family problems.

And that's not all. Yesterday we all sat down in front of the TV and tried to figure out what Nasrallah meant when he said they would attack places 'beyond Haifa' and 'beyond beyond Haifa', and Eitan asked if it would be okay – if the rockets reached Yokneam – for us to take in his family too, so I said, five people more, five people less, what's the difference.

Do you remember that only a few days ago we were in Neuland, Dori? 'Suddenly it seems so far away' – people always say that, don't they? But it's not true. At least not for me. I still speak Spanish to people sometimes, I still see images of the countryside in my mind, the rhythm of the journey is still in my body. And so are you, to be perfectly honest: you still flow in my blood.

Will you write to me again?

Yours,

Señorita Inbar

PS The business with my grandmother is actually pretty sad. It's really hard for me to see her like this. She was always my anchor.

PPS This war, there's something so unreal about it. Don't you think? Maybe Mr Neuland was right after all?

To: Inbar
From: Dori
Re: Worried about you

Señorita Inbar,

These emails remind me – towards the end of our stint in the army they took us on a tour of the Intelligence Corps research division. They already had computers but they still weren't totally secure, so they sent highly classified information to section chiefs through a system of chutes that opened into boxes in every office. They called those pages of classified information 'missiles' because a vacuum mechanism delivered them, rolled up like scrolls, to the personal box of whoever was authorised to

read them. You've received a missile! the deputy section chief would announce to the chief—

And that's how I feel when I see your name in my inbox. I hope you're keeping my emails to yourself, by the way. One forward and I'm dead.

I have to admit that, for me, our trip does seem a bit distant. There's something about children that doesn't leave you any choice but to live in the moment. Even more so with mine (we never talked much about him, did we?). He's been showing me who's boss since I came back. For the first two days he wouldn't even let me hug him. Then he did, but informed me that he wouldn't hug me back. And the nights were horrible. Little Oedipus got used to sleeping with his mum and didn't like the idea of my taking his place. So at about three in the morning, he gets out of his bed, comes into ours and starts kicking me out. And this is a boy – I have no other words to describe it – that I love like mad. We've always had a very strong connection. He's a wonderful child (objectively speaking, of course . . .). Clever and sensitive and beautiful. But before my trip, he had a lot of problems. Morning farewells at nursery were unbearable. Other kids didn't want to come to our house and we couldn't figure out why. And he did other things we didn't know what to make of. Like claiming there was a terrible smell in the house and no matter what we did to air the place, he kept crying about it. He cried constantly before I left on my trip. And then it turned out that my trip did what a year's worth of family therapy hadn't. He stopped crying and he's a happy camper now, as if I or maybe my relationship with him had been the problem all along.

I hope it's okay with you that I'm writing about him. It just seems strange to write about other things when he's really all I think about.

Just so you understand how deeply connected he and I are – yesterday I was giving him his bath and he suddenly looked up at me with those eyes that are as blue as my father's, and said: Daddy, who's Inbar?

I swear, that's what he said.

I don't know, I said. Maybe a girl at nursery?

No, he said firmly, there's no Inbar at nursery. Then he asked me to bring him his bath crayons and forgot the whole thing.

But I didn't. Nothing like you has ever happened to me before, Inbar. And I have no idea how to get my head around it. Maybe because it's something you can't get your head around and the road not taken has to remain not taken. Which means that we have to stop writing. Immediately. In fact, I shouldn't even send this email.

Dori

PS It really is so sad to see a person you love fade away right before your eyes. I remember it with my mother. Towards the end, I actually wanted her to die.

PPS This war gets weirder every day. I don't know whether Mr Neuland was right, but one good thing has definitely come out of my time there.

Yesterday I asked a music teacher at our school if he would give me some refresher trumpet lessons, and we're meeting next week. Nice, isn't it?

To: Dori
From: Inbar
Re: Anyone who really wants to end a correspondence shouldn't end his emails with a question mark

I'm happy to tell you that our place is now a mattress madhouse too. A Grad rocket landed 50 metres from Eitan's family's house in Yokneam and they've escaped to our place. My father and Eitan cleared out all the mess that was on the balcony, cleaned it up, closed it off with canvas and installed lighting and an overhead fan, and all of a sudden we have four rooms.

Even the smell of the house has changed over these last few days. Every house has its own smell, and ours used to be a combination of Eitan's aftershave, my shampoo, the fabric softener we both like and the fairly mouldy aroma of the large, old living room carpet.

Now there are so many new smells: my grandmother's old-age smell. The smell of the German perfume my mother seems to be using these days. The smell of chocolate that Reuven leaves behind. The smell of the embarrassment my father leaves behind. And the strongest of all: the smell of Eitan's teenaged brothers' sweat. Or to be more exact: the smell of the cheap deodorant they spray on their underarms *when* they're already sweaty.

Don't get me wrong. I love Eitan's family. But it's weird being with them when I know I'll probably be leaving him soon.

I think that deep inside, if I stop trying to persuade myself otherwise, I've known for quite a while that that's what I have to do. But two encounters helped me admit it to myself.

One, with you. And the other, with Reuven. My brother. What you said, it's absolutely right, that children force you to live in the moment. The minute he walks in the door – I'm totally his. For the few hours he's with me I don't think about anything (not even you!) but how to make him happy. We play whatever he wants: Lego, hide-and-seek, chasing. I even taught him Go Fish, and every time he says it with that Australian accent of his, I completely crack up. I love being with him. And he loves being with me. And it's because of him that I realise I made a mistake: it's not that I don't want to have children, I don't want to have them with Eitan.

So why don't you leave him? I hear your deep voice asking me from beyond the Judaean Hills.

Because, Mr Dori, it still takes strength to leave someone who loves you so much.

I'm building it now, my strength. Day after day. Hour after hour. And I'm also waiting for the war to end so I can have a normal breaking-up conversation in this house.

Yours,
Inbar

PS How great that you're going back to playing. You were fantastic on the drums in Neuland. As if they were actually part of your body. So I'm sure you'll be a star with the trumpet too. And when you appear with David Broza in bomb shelters during the next war, I can say that I was there when it all began. Anyway, let me know how the lesson goes. I, by the way, have finally started to write. Not the great novel yet, just a short story about a Jewish girl from Buenos Aires who falls in love with the son of a Nazi who fled to Argentina (for some reason, I've been preoccupied recently with impossible loves . . .).

PPS Don't worry about my forwarding your emails. I don't want you to die.
PPPS Don't worry about your son either. When I found out that my father had a new family, I was furious with him. But you can't stay angry at a parent for too long when the ties that bind you are stronger than your anger. It's a fact – he's here now and I don't bear him any ill feelings. Almost.

To: Dori
From: Inbar
Re: An idea
Hi,

I know I'm supposed to wait till you answer. But I suddenly thought I'd toss you a note over the wall that says: maybe we could meet?

I know it's daring, but (1) Don Anjel has already said that I'm daring by nature. (2) I'm sick and tired of writing prim and proper emails to hide the fact that I'm dying to see you. And (3) I'll be in Jerusalem next week, on Monday.

To: Inbar
From: Dori
Re: An idea
I don't think so, Inbar. I mean, it's tempting. Very tempting. I really miss our conversations. And when I heard on the news that the home front is strong enough to handle everything it has on its shoulders, I remembered your hand stroking my shoulders when we were on the way to Neuland. But I can't see you. Not now. And probably not later either. Even this emailing is difficult for me. I'm not the type, you see. I never knew how to hide things. I'm happy for you (really) that you've made your decision. But things are a little more complicated for me. I don't think it's right to involve you in it – but let's just say that I've been asking myself a few questions too after what happened to my father – and after meeting you. But in my case, we're talking about three people, and how did Don Anjel put it? The geometry of a triangle is a complex matter.

My grandfather Pima once told me: just don't make the same mistake I did – spending your whole life thinking about another woman. So I think I'll refuse your invitation because even now, without seeing you, I think about you quite a bit. Please, try to understand.

Dori

PS The nights here can be cold, so if you're coming to Jerusalem, bring a *jacketito*.

To: Dori
From: Inbar
Re: Pima?
My grandmother had a shipboard romance with a man named Pima. She met him on the way to Israel and I have no idea if anything even happened between them, but afterwards she dreamed about him all the time, and in the morning she'd tell my grandfather her dreams. If I'd been my grandfather, I'd have been jealous – some of those dreams were very detailed, but he'd just listen to her and stroke her hand patiently while she spoke.

After he died, I took over his role. I'd call her on my way to work and we'd tell each other what we'd dreamed at night. Including the most embarrassing things.

Her condition has got worse over the last few days. If before, the ratio of clear-minded moments to confused moments was 50–50, now it's 20–80. For example, she can't remember Eitan's name. She calls him by my old boyfriends' names – all of them except his. He's not offended because he's not the type to take offence. But when she calls my mother by one of her friends' names, she does take offence. My mother still takes care of her, but every time my grandmother makes a mistake with her name, my mother gets another white hair.

But my grandmother always recognises me. Always. *Tsipke feuer*, she calls me. Firebird. And also Inbari, sometimes.

Every morning she sits down at the window on the chair she brought from her apartment, then asks me to put the fan in front of her face, turn it on full blast and make her a cup of ordinary tea, 'not all those new kinds with the funny names'. When I hand her the steamy cup, she takes a small sip, then asks me to leave the room because she has something to do. Yesterday, I couldn't control myself any longer and asked her what she does when she's alone. She didn't say anything for a minute, took another sip, then said, 'What's left for a woman my age to do? I remember.'

In the end I didn't go to Jerusalem. I didn't really have an appointment. I'm Yossi Benbenisti's daughter, you see. I lie to the world and to myself all the time. With you I tried to do it as little as possible, but a scorpion always stings in the end.

Yours sincerely, Señorita Inbar

PS There was a direct hit on my grandmother's house yesterday. So that's it, she has no home left to go back to. There are thousands of people across the border who don't have homes any more either. And the craziest thing is that all of this is actually a repeat of the first Lebanon war. Do you think that from now on all the wars will start to repeat

themselves in reverse order? That we'll have a second Yom Kippur War? A second Six Day War? Do you see why there's something to be said for what Mr Neuland is trying to do? True, his means are radical, but maybe only radical means can work when everything else is at a statemate?

To: Inbar
From: Dori
Re: *Tsipke feuer*
That nickname, it really suits you.

Yesterday – you asked me to tell you – I had my first lesson. So first of all, we're not the only people whose homes are in chaos. My teacher's house is upside down because he's turned it into a refugee camp for dogs. There's a golden retriever from Kiryat Shmona, a dachshund from Acre and an Irish setter from Kfar Netter (I swear, not because of the rhyme). They were abandoned by their owners, who took off for the centre of the country, and he went up north to bring them home with him. When I walked in, all these displaced dogs jumped on me and I couldn't really imagine having a lesson with all that commotion. But he took me into an acoustic room where the ceiling was covered with egg cartons, closed the door behind us and said: play. Play what? I asked him. Whatever you want, he said. So I wiped the dust off Grandpa Pima's trumpet and played a piece he taught me once. I have no idea what it's called. Something Jewish, melancholy. While I was playing I thought of my grandfather, how he used to sit with me so patiently for hours. And how he took me to his performances, always sure that lots of people would attend, though only a few ever showed up. But it doesn't matter, he always said, I play because apart from love, music is the only thing that helps me get through life.

I remembered that as I played. And when I finished, my teacher said, okay, you made seven mistakes a minute, but you have the soul of a musician. Let's start working. And as we worked, I thought how long it's been since I was the one being taught, the one on the receiving end – since university, actually, and how nice it would be if I could believe that my grandfather and my mother, who always said it was a shame I didn't play an instrument, could look down and see me now.

Dori

PS My sister has started talking about going to Neuland too, after the war. I don't know what to say to her about that.
PPS What's your grandmother's name?

To: Inbar
From: Dori
Re: Later (not too late, I hope)
I know that it's your turn now, but I can't sleep. I tossed and turned in bed for two hours and finally came back to the computer. Suddenly, with a two-week delay (I'm slow, I know), my head is flooded with images from the journey. Voices, sounds, people. For example – I don't think I told you

this – Alfredo and I stopped at a kind of small shop on the way to the market in Otavalo to get out of the rain. It was before we met you. In short, when the owner heard that I was from ‘Jerusalén’ he insisted on giving me a note to put in the Western Wall for him. I’d completely forgotten about it, but yesterday I put on the trousers I’d worn that day and the note was there. In the pocket. Amazingly, the trousers have been washed at least once since then, but somehow the note didn’t crumble or fade. So I feel that I have to put it in the Wall, or else I’ll suffer dire consequences. And . . . I thought I’d ask you to join me.

Not now, of course, after the war. When there are no more guests in our houses or fighter planes in the air.

What do you say? I know this is exactly the opposite of what I said before. And the last thing I want is to drive you crazy, but I have conversations with you in my mind all day long, Inbar, and these emails, they’re becoming less and less connected to reality, and they create a separate, utopian world, and maybe if we stop writing and really see each other – one meeting, no more – it would help us to really let go of each other. And finally put an end to our journey.

I’ll understand if you refuse, Señorita. But still –

Yours, Dori

Dori. One Month Earlier

IT’S A GOOD thing it’s at night, he thinks, standing at the door to Netta’s room. If the flight were during the day, he’d have to forcibly tear the boy off his waist. There had been so many times when he’d stayed at home just because he couldn’t bear his crying. And other times, when he was leaving the house, the child would climb on to the plastic highchair and open the window that faces the street and cry, so the entire world could hear, don’t go, Daddy, don’t go, as if his father were leaving home for ever, not just going out to play basketball.

For the entire time he was preparing for the trip, Dori hoped with all his heart that he wouldn’t have to go. That at the last minute his sister Tse’ela and her ex, Aviram, would get their act together. That they’d find a way to put aside for a few weeks the anger and hurt that had accumulated between them during their ugly separation so that she could go herself. After all, she’d always been daddy’s little girl and he’d been mummy’s little boy in that unspoken division that occurs in all families, and she was also the one who’d kept in constant touch with their father since he’d left on his trip.

But it didn’t happen. And his suitcase is waiting for him at the door. And the taxi driver called to say he would be a bit early because there was a traffic jam at the entrance to the airport.

He goes into the room. On the floor are Netta’s small shoes, a stray red Lego piece and *Bob the Man in the Moon*, the book he read to his son at bedtime. When he finished, they closed the book and Dori lay down next to him, his long body beside Netta’s short one. Don’t forget that I’m going away tomorrow, he said. Will you be here for my birthday? Netta asked. I’ll try, he answered. Promise me you will! Netta demanded. I promise that I’ll try to be there, he said cautiously, although he thought that Tse’ela’s concern was over the top and that his trip wouldn’t be long.

Da-a-a-ddy! Netta said, and Dori tensed for the expected outburst, for the legs kicking at the cover, the small fists pounding on the pillow, the eyes peering out from the spaces between his fingers . . .

But Netta, apparently more tired than angry, thank God, closed his eyes and Dori stroked his head through his fine hair in a slow, spiral movement until he heard Netta's breathing settle into the even breathing of sleep.

He looks at him again now. How beautiful the boy is. And the position he's lying in – how misleading. On his back. Arms spread to the sides. Generously. You might really think he was a happy child.

He leans over and kisses him on the forehead – a light kiss so as not to wake him. And another one on his cheek. And another on the other cheek.

He doesn't feel like going. Not in the slightest. He wants to bury his nose deeper and deeper into Netta's smell, the smell of no-tears shampoo and the pyjamas still redolent of fabric softener even though he's already slept in them for a few days, and the warm milk with a teaspoon of brown sugar he drinks at bedtime, and a dash of Roni's perfume that stuck to him when she kissed him goodnight.

The driver calls again. He's already in the car park outside. And in the meantime, he's found out the reason for the traffic jam at the airport. Seems there's a terrorist attack alert and every car is being stopped for a thorough security check. So they really should get going. Another minute, Dori promises.

He moves from Netta's room into the light and takes out of his pocket the list Roni prepared for him in her neat handwriting. He's crossed out all the items that are already packed in his suitcase or his hand luggage, but he still has the feeling that something is missing. He rechecks the usual suspects: passport, ticket, vaccination card, sunglasses, history book, the set of pictures of his father. Then he goes into the bedroom and finds Roni completely buried under

her blanket, only a single curl visible. When they slept together the first few times in the apartment in Nahalot, he was afraid that she'd suffocate and he'd uncover her face when she'd fallen asleep. With time, it didn't worry him any more.

He traces the lock of hair with his finger till he reaches her head, and then Roni turns to him, reaches out and pulls him to her for a hug that surprises him. For the whole of the last week, she'd seemed to be anxious for him to leave. She spent the evenings locked in her study, claiming that 'those emails just create more and more work!' And once, when he tried to touch her under cover of darkness after they'd turned off their reading lamps, her body tensed and shrank back. Take care of yourself there, she says now. Her eyes are still closed, and he wonders whether she's really half asleep or whether she's pretending, avoiding meeting his eyes, as she's been doing all week. Maybe even all year.

Take care of Netta, he says and covers her again, thinking, I'm really going. It's really happening. Then he takes off his wedding ring and puts it on the dresser because where he's going, you don't walk around flashing gold jewellery, then goes back and turns off the lights, except in the bathroom – Netta screams if they don't leave it on. He takes in his last breath of the house, again thinking, what did I forget, what did I forget, what did I forget, damn it, then double-locks the door and leaves the key in the fuse box next to a dead cockroach that has been lying there on its back for a month because no one has removed it.

Night air enters his nostrils, but quickly turns into the cigarette smoke being exhaled by the driver, who offers to put his suitcase into the car for him. The driver looks about his father's age, so Dori does it himself, then gets into the back seat and drops his hand luggage next to him.

So, catching a flight, are we? the driver asks.

Yes, Dori says. Briefly. Curtly. As matter-of-fact as possible.

Business or pleasure? the driver continues his interrogation.

Neither, Dori admits.

*

It isn't until he sees the mobile phone company logo that he remembers. His mobile. Shit. That's what he forgot. Lucky they have a branch here, he thinks. But when he gets closer, he sees the sign on the door of the shop: A service stand opening here soon. Soon isn't good. How can he get in touch with Tse'ela? How will he let Roni know he's arrived safely? He looks at his watch. Fifty minutes to take-off. There's no way he can make it back home. Besides, he's already passed the point of no return for passport checks.

A girl with a mobile pressed to her ear walks past him. Suddenly he's seized by a criminal urge of the kind he's felt too often lately: to bump into the young girl, as if accidentally, and snatch her phone. He takes a deep breath, lets the urge pass, and walks over to the café. In the queue, he's approached by two guys and a girl who ask him to take a picture of them. What is there to photograph? he thinks, you haven't done anything yet, but he agrees and waits for them to choose a pose – arms out to the sides, as if they were an aeroplane – and, focusing on the girl's cleavage, he clicks the button, returns the camera and asks them where they're going. Quito, one of the guys says, with a connection in Barcelona, and Dori takes a closer look at them, wondering about the makeup of the group, two guys and a girl – it would clearly end in tears – and says: me too. They ask how long he's planning to be in South America and he says he doesn't know, for the time being he doesn't have a return ticket, and the girl smiles at him, exposing a crooked tooth, and says to the guy standing furthest from her, you see, Tuvy, I told you, that's the way to travel, and he says, but we bought return tickets because of you, sunshine, and

the other guy, who's standing next to her, explains, Noya's starting her Master's degree in international relations.

Dori nods, as if in confirmation, but still can't figure out the relationships in this threesome, and thinks momentarily of a world in which everyone lives in threesomes, how many problems it would solve and how many new problems it would create, and he thinks that he, in fact, lives in a threesome too, with Netta and Roni. If you need anything – Noya touches his arm, interrupting his thoughts – just say the word. We're hooked up. Hotels, treks, prices.

Thanks, see you on the plane, he says in a tone much cooler than he intended, and they draw back, as if he'd pushed them, and go off on their way. Recently, he thinks regretfully, this has been happening to him quite a bit: speaking in a tone that's inappropriate to the circumstances and to what he's actually feeling. As if he's already forgotten how to act with people who aren't his students. As if he's lost the simple ability to engage in a sincere conversation, to search for the common denominator, to move closer.

From his table, he continues to watch the three as they go in and out of the duty free shops without buying anything. There is such exuberance in their movements, the way they walk, the way they stand still, the way Noya pushes her beautiful black hair from side to side every few seconds. They tease each other, clink tall glasses of the red wine they buy and take another picture beside the fountain.

The departure board is above the fountain. Written next to their flight is: ON TIME.

Dori's former friends – all of his friends became 'former' after they became parents – also went travelling after the army. They learned Spanish before they went. They attended lectures for travellers. They worked at all sorts of odd jobs to pay for their tickets. He didn't go. His most burning need when he left the army was not to go away, but

to find something he was good at, something that would help rebuild his confidence, his identity, which had become shaky during his three years of reconnoitring Lebanese villages along the security strip. On the Mount Scopus campus he met Roni, who stated with her usual conviction that ‘all those trips are one big escape, an attempt to postpone real life’, thus putting an end to the possibility that he would be a backpacker, because from the moment he met Roni and joined his fate to hers, he felt a pit of longing open instantly beneath him whenever he was without her. His friends, for their part, returned from their long holidays with tasteless gifts and an unlimited supply of in-jokes. Years later, recalling a Brazilian drag queen they met in the carnival, or some disastrous sandboarding they’d done in Peru, they’d convulse with laughter. And he’d convulse right along with them. He’d heard those stories so many times that he felt as if he’d been there himself. Now, with a slight delay of fifteen years, he really would be there. Light ripples of the thrill of the journey pass through him, and immediately, to subdue them and remind himself of the real reason he’s at the airport, he puts down his coffee, takes three pictures of his father out of his bag and spreads them on the table.

The first is a ‘mug shot’ that his sister Tse’ela found tossed in their father’s document drawer. He looks startled. The lighting is unflattering. The close-up is cruel. And yet, even in the mug shot his father looks handsome. Soft eyes. Strong nose. Intelligent forehead. Women always smiled broadly at his father. As a child, Dori didn’t understand why, but when he got a bit older and the girls at school used to whisper and gather around them on parents’ day, he began to realise that his father looked good. And he hoped that some of that would rub off on him. If not right away, at least in the future.

The second picture was cut from a photo found in Tse’ela’s wedding album. The original showed Tse’ela, her hair

braided in the elaborate style so many brides seem to have, beside Aviram, her former husband, and on either side of them their parents glowing like two moons, each with a hand hugging the one closest to them and the other hand holding a drink: Mum orange punch and Dad his usual sparkling water.

The piece cut from the photo shows his father's head and the very edge of his neck. His hair, not yet dotted with islands of white, is brushed into a giant crest that juts out of the frame. He has a protruding Adam's apple, as do all the men in the family (did you swallow a spoon, Dori, or are you just happy to see me? Roni once asked him as he approached her in Rachel's cafeteria).

The third picture was too old to really help, but he took it anyway. It was the only one in all the albums in which both he and his father appear. Tse'ela must already have been in the army. His mother, as usual, took the picture. And they, the two of them, are standing on their skis on Mount Hermon, wearing woollen hats. His father's is black, his white. They are almost the same height. He might have been a little taller than his father, though he probably didn't feel that way because he was only fifteen and his height was new to him.

Cold. You can tell that it's cold from their jackets, which are zipped all the way up. Even the touch of that picture, Dori thinks, is colder than the others. And yet, even though it is so cold, they're not hugging, just standing next to each other. They never really hugged. Not all the way. Even when Dori would come back from Lebanon, even at his mother's funeral, their hugs were always tentative – his father would tap his back lightly with one hand, and with the other he'd already be pushing him away. When I see him this time, Dori promises himself now, I'll throw my arms around him and hold him so tightly that he won't have any choice but to hug me back.

There are dozens of other pictures of his father in his suitcase, carefully packed. Alfredo, his contact in Quito, wasn't too keen on pictures, saying that he didn't believe in them, only in information, but that Dori could bring a few, just in case. So last Saturday, he and Tse'ela took the albums off the shelf and went through them, sharing the memories each picture summoned up as they removed it from its clingy plastic cover. Here's the trip to Nahal Yehudia, when Mum sprained her foot and Dad carried her to the car. Here's that visit to the amusement park when Dori realised for the first time that his father wasn't omnipotent: he suffered from motion sickness and couldn't go on the roller coaster. Here's the house in Mevasseret that Dad built for ten years and they never lived in because Mum didn't want to. Look, Tse'ela pointed to their father wearing a hard hat and standing near a scaffold. Here he is at your age, she said. Can you see how much he looks like you? What are you talking about, Tsel, he objected, he doesn't look like any of us. Maybe a bit like Aviram. You are evil, she said, giving him a look, even though she knew he was right. The physical resemblance between Aviram and their father had always been so striking that Dori had to stop himself from laughing the first time Aviram came to their house for dinner.

Tse'ela put the bar mitzvah album back on the pile. Sorry, Dori apologised quickly. I didn't mean to pour salt on your . . . Aviram. And she said, it's not because of him . . . it's just . . . I'm worried about Dad.

I'd like to remind you, Tsel, that this is our father, Dori said. He survived the toughest battle of the Yom Kippur War, so what's South America for him?

That's exactly why I'm worried, Tse'ela insisted. This whole business just isn't like him.

Dori reaches into his back pocket now for his mobile to write a short, optimistic text message to his sister –

His pocket is empty. Never mind, he reassures himself. When we land in Barcelona I'll find an Internet café and write to her. *Let's make a deal*, he writes the message in his head. *I'll find Dad and you find a new love. Why? Because you deserve it. True, you always stole my toys when we were little, and you always have to stick your nose into everything, but I think you're awfully brave for getting up and leaving Aviram, and you're a fantastic mother to your kids. Yes, fantastic. So you deserve only good things. And don't worry about Dad. I mean, worry. It's impossible not to. But I promise to leave no stone unturned, as if I were you.*

'Will passengers on flight 256 to Barcelona please proceed to the boarding gate'. The announcement interrupts his thoughts and he puts the pictures back in his bag. Fastens the buckle. Gets up. And goes.

*

These earphones they give you on planes – he tries again to fit them into his ears so they'll hurt less, and remembers that the film that's about to start, *Before Sunset*, played at the Smadar a few months ago and he asked Roni if she wanted to go. She said she wasn't sure she could handle all that romantic blabbering. Do you remember where . . .? He tried to kindle a flame in the dying coals. Of course I remember where we saw *Before Sunrise*, she answered with the fatigue that follows a day of battling at work, that cinema, you know, the one near the beach in Tel Aviv, after you threw me out. I didn't throw you out, he said, playing his part in the familiar dialogue, I just wanted a few days' break.

Two days, to be exact. A little less than forty-eight hours without her was enough to break him, even though none of the reasons he asked for that break, none of the foreboding he felt, had disappeared. He was still upset about her past history with love – from the age of sixteen she'd never been