

Lizzie Doron

Who the Fuck is Kafka?

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pp. 9-31

Prologue

Tel Aviv, July 2014

IT'S AN ORDINARY SUMMER morning. The sun is shining, the big city is bright, and war is raging in Gaza. I'm writing at my desk, lost in turns of phrases and punctuation, and then the siren howls, breaking the silence, my heart skips, I leap up.

The dry voice of the radio announcer comes from the next room, asking the residents of metropolitan Tel Aviv to get to their shelters.

My legs and hands are trembling, I take a deep breath, grab a bottle of water and my cell phone from the counter in the kitchen, and run to our shelter at the end of the apartment.

I need to be sitting inside the shelter within a minute and a half from the first wail of the sirens.

I'm obedient and always follow the army's orders to a T, so once again I find myself within this windowless space of reinforced concrete, with nothing but a steel door. The room has chairs for all the members of the family, emergency lights, a First Aid kit, gas masks, and a package of dry, long-since-expired cookies from the previous war.

The room is small, two meters long, two meters wide, but this the shelter that is supposed to save my life.

This morning, I'm at home all alone; I sit and listen to the beating of my heart and echoes of explosions.

This morning, the voice of the war is closer than ever before.

I send urgent text messages to my family to make sure they're in shelters too; there's another explosion and more howling of sirens; and then the phone rings.

No caller ID.

I answer.

"My darling," says a voice I instantly recognize, "I'd like you to know you're welcome at our place. I assume they won't be setting off rockets at Jerusalem, so I want you to know that, as of now, my house is your house—yours and your whole family's."

"How are you?" I ask, voice trembling. Quite a gesture, I think.

"As well as can be expected," he replied matter-of-factly.

"Nadim," I asked him, "what do you think is going to happen?" Nadim is the Middle East expert, after all, who had been sending me signs of life strictly by phone and Internet for more than two years.

He sends text messages or calls on holidays, as well as on birthdays and on Israeli days of remembrance.

He always promises we'll meet in person again, but he always withdraws and disappears.

"To answer your question," Nadim says, "I think everything can still get worse."

Both of us burst out in desperate laughter.

"Well, if that's the case, thanks for your offer," I say. "But you know—"

He interrupts me, not accepting my no.

"You need to know that you have a home in East Jerusalem." Nadim is trying to make crystal clear to me that he's serious.

At the end of our call, we promise we'll see one another again soon—how could it have ended otherwise?

Four days later

It's evening, sirens wailing in Jerusalem.

I call Nadim.

"And what now?" I ask.

He doesn't say anything.

"Where are you?" I ask, depressed. "Say something."

"This time, if we survive this, I promise we'll see each other again," he says.

"In Tel Aviv or Jerusalem?" I ask, wanting specificity, wanting to nail a meeting down.

"In Rome," he says. "Darling, let's meet in Rome."

Two years earlier, the evening before the trial

June 17, 2012

"So Nadim said he is coming tomorrow?"

"He'll come!"

Dani grins. "You really think so?"

"Maybe it'd be better if he doesn't come," I say. "The Supreme Court will hold the hearing without him being present."

"We may even end up making peace without the Palestinians," Dani says dryly.

Six o'clock in the evening, and I've already been thinking about Laila for a couple of hours. I keep picturing Nadim's wife with her quiet voice and dead eyes. The woman who has learned to look up over the treetops and not hope for anything. She's slim and pretty.

I think about Nadim, who moves in cycles like the seasons—he comes and goes, he comes and goes, autumn, winter, spring, and summer. Sometimes stormy, sometimes calm, sometimes blooming, sometimes wilted, sometimes warm, sometimes cold and stiff.

There are only good or bad days in his life; he himself describes his inner conflicts as "honey or onion."

I haven't laid eyes on him for six months; he's avoiding me, he rarely answers my text messages.

"How are you?" I just texted him.

"At war, as in war," he replied, leaving my heart heavy.

Rome

Cinecittà

"I'M NADIM FROM JERUSALEM," I heard a man say in fluent English with a strong Arabic accent. I was late arriving at the auditorium. The Italian moderator, Maria, a woman of about forty with Mediterranean looks, brown hair, and the husky voice of a smoker, urgently gestured for me to take my place up on the stage. I took pains to quietly take my seat on empty chair that was waiting for me, and I studied the man currently at the podium with curiosity.

The dim lighting made it hard for me to see. I heard Nadim's pleasant, warm voice as another voice grew loud

inside my head.

Operation Cast Lead was the name the man on the news had given the war raging in the country I had just left to come to Rome. He reported the air force and ground troops had invaded Gaza and returned fire in response to shots along the border with the Gaza Strip. He mentioned the names of the terrorist organizations that had launched more than sixty missiles at the border settlements over the past few weeks.

The war had already started when I received the invitation to spend a weekend in Rome. An association of dreamers who wanted to change the realities of the Middle East had invited Israeli and Palestinian peace activists to a three-day congress.

I had accepted and traveled to Rome, and now I was listening to Nadim Abu Hanis from East Jerusalem speak.

“I arrived at the airport four hours before my departure,” he was saying, “and I gave the security personnel my ticket. I was taken to the security check and subjected to the capriciousness of the metal detector, which then began beeping enthusiastically in my honor. They took me into an adjoining room, and the questions started. A security officer wanted to know where I was going and why. I said I was going to Rome to bring peace. At those words, the people standing around me erupted in loud laughter.”

Before I left my house, my husband Dani had complained this dream business was costing us a lot of money; we had been financing my travels for the sake of peace for years now. For a financial consultant like him, such expenditures were hard to justify. “You’ve been doing this for thirty years without anything having come of it. If you were my client, I would have long ago recommended you close up shop.”

I didn’t respond; I knew he was right.

“Thirty years ago you only used to go to demonstrations,” he continued, “and that didn’t cost anything.” Something inside was telling me this was going to be one of my last peace conferences.

“After this, we’re spending money only on wars,” I promised Dani, to cheer him up.

I silenced the thoughts shooting through my head and focused again on what Nadim was saying.

“I understand,’ the security officer said with sarcastic seriousness and asked me to wait. Only after he went to the computer and pulled up some information there did he admit I was probably OK, and he apologized for having to check up on the risk posed by my family’s situation. He asked a series of questions about my wife and children, inquiring whether any of them was a terrorist. As for my wife Laila, my answer was unequivocal, but as for my children, I said it was hard to answer because my elder son was ten and a half and the younger, nine. Then he turned to my other relatives. I explained I have eight siblings, or rather sisters—unfortunately I’m my father’s only son.

“‘Are there terrorists in your family?’ he wanted to know.

“If there is a terrorist, I thought, I’m the only one it can be. My sisters have all been married for ages and are scattered to the four winds, they live in Jordan, Gaza, Dubai, Egypt.

“‘Are you a member of a terrorist organization?’

“‘No.’

“‘Has anyone in your family been involved in terrorist actions? Donated money to them? Volunteered for them?’

“Eight times I answered no.

“He let me leave the country more than two hours later, but he informed me the flight I was supposed to be

on had already taken off. He tried to reassure me by quickly adding that the next flight was in five and a half hours, so it was clear to me I would be spending that time dawdling around in the duty-free shop.

“The man likely didn’t understand why I was smiling at him—how could he know that I love duty-free and duty-free loves me. Everyone knows me there, Nadim Abu Hani from East Jerusalem, he buys shoes, shirts, jogging suits, underwear . . . he buys everything, he always has time.

“As I’m sure you’ve gathered, I missed my scheduled flight and arrived late to Rome—but at least in new tennis shoes,” he said, pointing at his feet.

There was more laughter from the audience, and I noticed I was laughing too.

“So please pardon my being late,” he added.

He sure knows how to tell a story, I thought with admiration.

“What do you do? I mean professionally?” an audience member asked.

“I teach Italian at the university for a living, and in my spare time I work for human rights organizations.”

“What do you do for them?” the man asked.

“I film,” he answered curtly.

“So you film what they are doing to you?” someone called out.

Nadim didn’t answer; he had already handed his microphone back to Maria.

I had no idea that this would be the day something would start up between us, and I certainly couldn’t imagine sitting in my kitchen three years later one evening in July wondering whether we would be meeting in person in court the next morning at eleven thirty.

I studied him more closely, his nicely curved lips, his round face. My eyes lingered on his long eyelashes that shaded his eyes. He had pushed his silver-framed eyeglasses onto the top of his head, adorning his hair like a crown.

Arabs don’t wear eyeglasses, flashed through my head, immediately pushing that racist thought aside.

The audience thanked Nadim for his speech with applause.

Maria turned to me.

“I’m from Israel, Tel Aviv,” I said in response to her question.

“Were you pulled off your flight at the airport too?” someone called.

I wanted to answer by saying that we don’t hijack planes and blow up apartment blocks or set off bombs in the street, and that we generally also don’t wear explosive shoulder bags, but I decided to ignore the heckler. I politely apologized for being late.

“My departure was delayed, as usual for security reasons.”

Yet more heckling: “Why did you start another war?”

I certainly wouldn’t personally respond to missiles launched at Israeli targets with warplanes; all the background to the confrontation was hard to explain; and to tell the truth, I hadn’t been informed about the details of it all either. I decided not to get into a direct confrontation.

“The State of Israel took in all the Jews who had been expelled during the Diaspora,” I started to say instead.

“The survivors of the Holocaust came to our country. People who were fleeing Stalin’s oppression and the pogroms in Arab countries also came. The State of Israel is basically a psychiatric institution for Jews with posttraumatic stress.” I thought for a second how to explain this. “All of us came to Israel to help each other, to find protection from an existential threat. We sought healing for our souls and our bodies, we wanted to

overcome our traumas.”

The people in my country are in a sort of hospital, I explained, they yearn for normal life, they look for a doctor who can bring them recovery and calm. “The people in this country are looking for a way to survive. But they haven’t found the calm and security they long for so far—either in peace or in wartime.”

Our sanatorium of a nation, I said, is encountering additional problems, and the situation is getting more and more complex because neither the Palestinians nor our Arab neighbors will accept our presence.

I searched for Nadim’s eyes, wanting to see whether my words were affecting him, but I couldn’t make anything out from the look on his face.

I was disappointed.

I took a sip of water to stall for time. Maria used the pause to reach for the microphone.

“A psychiatric institution,” she said. “You’ve surprised us with that!” The audience laughed.

She wanted to know if anyone had questions.

There weren’t any.

“Then we’ve reached our conclusion,” Maria said, thanking the audience and all of the guests on the stage. I exhaled with relief; I already had experience with conferences like this one and knew the hard questions were yet to come, but for the moment I could catch my breath a bit and gather strength for the upcoming confrontations and debates.

The members of the delegation shook each other’s hands. A Palestinian writer, an Israeli journalist, an Israeli professor of gender studies, a young woman from Jenin whose sister had been involved in terrorist actions and had died getting ready for one, a teacher from Ramallah, and Nadim—we all were trying to be friendly, but Nadim’s and my handshake was a bit warmer.

“Listen, I’m really sorry about the security check, but you know there’s no other option,” I told him. “In the end we all want to live.”

He set his other hand on mine. “I know; I’ve also been admitted to your ‘hospital,’” he said with a smile.

So he had been listening.

“Except that I’m in the ward for special cases,” he added, and I could only laugh.

“And what ward are you in?” he asked.

I had no time to answer because Maria then rushed us over the dining hall.

During the short walk I called home to see if everything was OK. I asked about the news from the front. “The usual, there’s shooting in Gaza,” Dani said, ending the call by saying, “It’s good you’re in Rome and I’m in Tel Aviv.”

I spotted Nadim in the dining hall. He was smiling and gesturing to a seat he was saving a seat for me.

Once I came closer, he stood up to help me out of my coat. I let him only because I was embarrassed and surprised. He swiftly and competently hung my coat over the back of my chair. A Palestinian gentleman, I thought, a turn of phrase that had never crossed my mind before.

“I haven’t introduced myself,” the gentleman said. “Nadim Abu Hansi, from East Jerusalem.”

I looked at him before sitting down. You could tell he was an Arab, striped shirt, striped socks, and the accent of course. If he’s an Arab, I hope he’s a Christian, flashed through my head.

Stop with the racist thoughts, I scolded myself.

I had hardly sat down when a group of musicians entered the hall and started playing Italian songs. Nadim sang along; he knew the words and the melodies. I raised my eyebrows.

“I went to college here. I was nineteen when I arrived and twenty-five when I went back home, to Silwan.” My eyebrows returned to normal position.

“Is it hard living in Silwan?” Silwan of all places, I thought, a Jerusalem neighborhood that frequently comes up in the Israeli news.

“Our situation has improved recently,” he replied. He smiled cryptically. “A rumor has been spreading recently that your Messiah will come from Silwan, which is why a police unit was established in his honor to keep anyone from running around there with rockets or guns. Security people search me before I enter my home—your people are presumably afraid I’ll blow up myself or, God forbid, your soon-to-come Messiah.” The smile stayed on his face.

Serves me right, I thought. I asked, and I got my answer.

“I’m sorry you have had the pleasure of meeting fifty of the craziest Jews in the country,” I said apologetically. “That’s how it is in Jerusalem these days, all the lunatics gather together in the city.”

“We’re in Rome now,” Nadim said, pointing at the menu to relax the mood. “May I make a recommendation?”

“Sure,” I said, surprised at my casual tone.

He ordered two plates of tortellini for the main course and crème brûlée for dessert. “You are sitting next to an expert in Italian cuisine and Persian rugs—someone who used to sell wine and carpets to the Italians when he was in college.”

I was glad he was saying something. “If that’s the case, you’re invited to come to Tel Aviv,” I replied, telling him about Ben Yehuda Street. That’s pedestrian shopping street where the merchants lay their carpets out to show them to passers-by.

“I can’t come to Tel Aviv—for me, Jerusalem is the center of the world,” he said dryly. “By the way, is this your first time to Italy?” he asked, changing the subject to focus on me.

“Rome, Milan, Florence,” I said, listing the places our family had enjoyed visiting before. “And you?” I asked.

“Do you ever come to Italy with your family?”

“We don’t travel abroad,” he said curtly.

“Why not?”

“Because of Laila, my wife,” he said.

“Is she sick?”

“Worse—she’s from Hebron.” He smiled again, but this time only with his lips; his eyes were cold.

“And that means . . . ?” I asked, confused.

“She doesn’t have an Israeli passport. She has the status only of a tolerated resident. She can’t leave the country.”

“What does that mean?”

“If she leaves the country, she can never return.”

“But you’re from Israel, and Jerusalem. The city is unified,” I say with astonishment.

“The city is unified, but its inhabitants are no such thing. As for Laila, she’s a Palestinian from Hebron. That’s how she was born, and that’s how she will die, even though we’ve been married for fourteen years. She doesn’t have a right to an Israeli passport, and she’ll never get one.”

“Really?” I didn’t understand.

“Really.” He cocked his head at me a bit, apparently put off by my ignorance. “In short, if she wants to leave Israel, she needs a special permit that we could never actually get.” He spoke quietly, but I noticed his leg twitching under the table from suppressed rage.

“Our history is complicated,” I said to reassure him. “I know you know if they gave an Israeli passport to every Palestinian woman who married an Arab Israeli, then all of Palestine would move to Jerusalem.” Nadim didn’t say anything. He leaned back in his chair, trying to increase the distance between us.

I recalled a saying of my late mother’s: Sometimes it’s better to look and listen and hush. Somewhat belatedly, I decided to take her advice and keep my mouth shut. I looked around at our hosts and the other invitees enjoying their meals.

Why in hell did I come here? a voice inside me whispered.

Seriously—why? I’m asking myself the same thing today, on this evening, three years after Nadim and I met in Rome. Even then I knew the peace conference would be as successful as all that came before it. We would spend a weekend together and then return home more or less satisfied; and the wars would go on; and a new aid organization would eventually form and invite us to another peace conference, after which Qassam rockets would once again be in the air and jets would once again be dropping bombs; and we and they would count our losses.

Maybe I came, I thought, because ever since Shmulik died in the Yom Kippur War almost forty years ago, I’ve been having the same dream over and over again.

In it, I’m running along the beach between Tel Aviv and Jaffa with two of my girlfriends. The night is dimly brightened from the light of the moon. Suddenly a scream hits our ears.

I look around, and despite the darkness I see a car without wheels stuck in the sand. Inside is a woman dressed in black pressing a bundle wrapped in white cloth to her heart—maybe it’s an object, maybe it’s a baby.

“Something terrible has happened,” I tell my friends.

“You’re dreaming,” one of them says, with neither a face nor a name.

“Can’t you hear it?” I say. “Someone is calling for help! Help! Help!”

I scream together with the woman. “There in the car,” I say pointing. “It’s a woman with a baby!”

“That’s just an abandoned vehicle,” the other friend says, also nameless and faceless. “No one’s there.”

“Help! Help!” I scream, my voice breaks, my throat hurts.

“There’s a baby in there, maybe he’s choking, maybe he’s injured . . .” I try to shake my friends’ shoulders.

“Alice in Wonderland,” they say in chorus. “There she goes again with the exaggerating.”

I want to run over to the woman in the car.

“If you went over there, what do you think you could do?” one of my companions asks, mocking me.

“Help! Help!” I scream, I can’t stop.

“What’s wrong with you?” the other friend scolds. “You’re screaming like a lunatic.”

It’s in the morning paper: A newborn infant died on the beach overnight, his mother claims she was calling for help, and three young women walked past her and didn’t do anything.

Then we’re standing in a courtroom.

The first friend claims she didn’t see or hear anything. She is acquitted.

The second friend claims she wasn’t able to help. She is acquitted.

When it’s my turn, I walk up to the witness stand on wobbly knees. The judge studies me with cold eyes and says, “You will be notified.”

Nadim ripped me from my thoughts. “Cinecittà,” he said.

Cinecittà, I liked the sound of it.

“Is that kind of like ‘abracadabra’ for you?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said, apparently pleased with the idea.

“Cinecittà,” he repeated softly.

The server came with our tortellini.

I happily dug in.

“You chose well,” I said. Nadim was browsing through the wine menu reading the names aloud.

“Marsala, Martini, Martini Prosecco, Chianti made from Sangiovese grapes.”

“Your Italian is wonderful,” I said with admiration. He accepted my praise with a friendly smile.

“What would you like to drink?” he asked.

“I’ll have the Chianti. And you?”

“I don’t drink,” he said.

So he was Muslim.

I admit I was disappointed.

What business did I have at this peace conference with thoughts like that passing through my head? I asked myself.

I looked at him again. “Why did you decide on Italy for college?”

“My great-grandmother was Italian.”

“Really?” So he wasn’t a hundred percent Arab. I liked that answer; I wanted to hear the whole story and asked him for the details.

“As far as I know,” Nadim willingly offered, “around the turn of the last century, my great-grandfather had gone on a business trip that took him from Jerusalem to Jaffa and from Jaffa to Rome, and he returned with a beautiful Turinese girl named Cosima.”

The name Cosima made me smile; I was hoping to hear the rest of the story, but Nadim wanted to find out more about me.

“What do you do for a living?” he asked.

“I’m a writer,” I said.

“Really? How did you become a writer?”

“For me, it was the Shoah. My mother was a Holocaust survivor, but she had never said anything about her life. She had a sort of silence policy, you understand,” I said, immediately finding myself thinking, How can he understand?

His eyes narrowed a bit. Maybe he regretted asking the question.

“My mother was one of those survivors who said nothing whenever they were asked what had happened during the war. Well, many years after my mother died, my daughter was supposed to tell our family’s story at school. So I was forced to talk to my daughter about my mother and to remember. And my memories turned into a story, and the story into a book.” I spoke quickly, feeling like what I had to say sounded trite and hackneyed.

“Do you miss your mother?”

His question took me by surprise. “Not really,” I said honestly.

I could see the surprise in his eyes. He looked down, weakly saying his mother had died a few years ago and he missed her, she had been the light of his life. I looked at him. The way I felt about my mother, whether alive or dead, had never been as longing and nostalgic. This realization took my breath away.

“People and their mothers,” I said, turning red.

He took a pack of some kind of medication out of his pants pocket, and I bluntly asked, "What's wrong?" "Actually nothing out of the ordinary, something or other just always hurts. Right now, for instance, it's my head." And with a half smile he added, "Would you care for some too?" He seemed unwilling to let his headache disrupt our conversation. He took a pill from the pack and swallowed it without water.

I smiled and said I also traveled with First Aid supplies and panicked whenever something didn't hurt. "Well, then, what would the lady like?" he said, politely offering me a selection of pills he had in his repertoire.

"I'll keep my options open for now," I promised.

Nadim returned to our topic. "So what else do you write about apart from your mother's story?"

I told him I write stories about people who have fought in war, about their traumas. About people struggling with nightmares who nonetheless rise to a new life.

"Then you could write about me," he said with a laugh. I thanked him for the offer with a smile.

"And what do you do?" I asked.

"As I said at the podium, for bread and butter I teach Italian, and in my free time I work for human rights organizations."

"And what exactly do you do for these organizations?" I pressed.

"I take pictures."

"You're a photographer?"

He sighed. "Oh, that would be nice. That was my childhood dream. You won't believe it, but I started taking pictures in October 1973." He continued without my having to ask, telling me the whole story.

"I was eight, and there were sirens wailing outside, and my parents were looking in terror for something to hide under in the basement. At the time I didn't understand what they had to be afraid of." He laughed aloud again. "Today I know perfectly well," he said as though to himself, and then he continued. "But at the time, when your jets were thundering through the skies, I took my father's camera out into the yard. I wanted to take pictures of the planes and send them to the TV station, but by the time I made it outside, the planes were already gone. I didn't give up, though; I followed the con trails in the sky with the camera. I remember a neighbor looking at me, horrified when he saw me walking around outside while the howls of sirens were still waxing and waning. I went back inside only after the all-clear signal. My father was furious, he punished me for sneaking out during the sirens and informed me I could never touch his camera ever again. After that I really didn't ever lay a finger on his camera again, but I never gave up dreaming about being a photographer one day. I'm still dreaming about it today, by the way. Unfortunately, I'm still really good at dreaming," he concluded, with a hint of a smile before falling silent.

The silence spread, and I sank back into my own memories of the air raid sirens he had mentioned. Sirens wailed through my own head. I recalled the shivers down my spine as I put on my uniform and rushed to the unit I was serving with at the time.

I felt engulfed again by the waves of ringing telephones and screams from Rafi, our commander, who yelled alternately at me and Dafna.

"Do something! Dispatch rescue services! Ambulances!"

"How?" Dafna yelled back. "And who? No one's here!" She tried to explain to Rafi that the base was empty, that everyone had already ridden up to the front in tanks. But Rafi kept repeating they needed to send help. Then the battalion commander Roni stormed in holding dozens of ID tags gathered from the first victims of the battlefield, and he set them on the table.

(pp 124-133)

Toward evening the following Sunday, Nadim and I were sitting in a restaurant by the beach in Tel Aviv awaiting the representative from the European Union. The sun sank into the tranquil sea before us, the sky burned orange-red, optimism welled up in me.

"I'm Michelle Peterson," the woman said with a friendly smile. She was wearing a Chanel suit, her hair pulled back at the nape of her neck. I studied her. Everything about her was well-shaped. Her hands, her legs, her hips, her breasts, even the features of her face. Her nose matched her mouth, her eyes, her ears. Everything was fully symmetrical. Before sitting down with us, she said in French-tinged English how pleased she was to meet us and how moving it was to find people breaking out of their everyday lives to take a stand for a better world. "That is how great revolutions begin," she said.

Nadim leaned over to me and whispered "Cinecittà," our magic code word that stood for Rome where we first met and where our friendship began.

"Tell me about yourself," Michelle said, turning to him directly.

"I was born in Jerusalem," Nadim began, "into a family who's lived in the city for more than ten generations now. In the nineteen eighties when the unrest started, they closed the university in the West Bank, so I moved to Rome for my degree. I studied Italian and translated texts from Arabic-speaking media for the Institute for International Political Studies. After I came home, I took a position at the Department of Linguistics at Al-Quds University in East Jerusalem. I was also a volunteer teacher at a youth center in Ramallah. Otherwise in my free time, I worked for a human rights organization in the occupied territories."

I listened to Nadim with the same attentiveness as Michelle's.

"Impressive," she said. "What exactly do you do with that organization?"

"I photograph incidents," he answered, smiling at me.

"What do you photograph?"

"I photograph buildings being demolished, clashes at army road closures, and arrests."

Michelle went wide-eyed; she liked those kinds of activities.

Nadim paused for effect, pouring water in to his, my, and her glasses from the bottle standing on the table. She waited anxiously for what was yet to come.

Nadim was responsive to her body language; he spoke confidently and fluently. "I met Laila amid the incidents, demolitions, and clashes, and she then became my wife. That's a story unto itself," he said, quickly looking askance at me before turning back to Michelle. "Laila's brother had shown me a photo she took in Gaza during the Intifada. She had taken it from her bedroom window, and it showed a soldier beating up a teenage Palestinian boy. The moment she captured was of the soldier raising his hand; you could see the surprise in the boy's eyes. I think the instant I saw that photo is when I fell in love with Laila. I wanted to get to know her. After a few weeks we decided to get married, but our wedding is also a story unto itself." Nadim glanced at me again.

"They had issued a curfew for all of Gaza the night we had planned our wedding ceremony, of all nights. Laila was standing at her window in her wedding dress, and I was trying to come pick her up but was stuck outside

town wearing my formal suit and holding a bouquet of roses. I had to stay put even though I had all the required permits. I tried to find someone to help me, I begged, I pleaded, until I realized Laila would not be able to come to Jerusalem. I still remember handing the bouquet to a soldier and asking him to put it in water so the roses wouldn't wilt."

What's going on here? I wondered. How was it that I was hearing this story for the first time here and now—in the presence of Michelle, of all people? Why hadn't Nadim ever mentioned anything about his wedding until today? After all, I was the person he had sought out to tell his stories to. In my anger I thought maybe Dvora was right, maybe I should finally shut my mouth and listen.

"Then I headed back to Jerusalem," Nadim said, concluding the story of his nuptials, "to the guests waiting in the hall, and let them know that the army had spoiled my wedding."

"Kafka," Michelle said with a nod, looking at me knowingly.

I tried to make eye contact with Nadim, but he was looking at Michelle, whose eyes had sunk into his. She was captivated. Stories were his way of making contact, of touching another person. Somewhere there between his voice and his words, between his sentences and his pauses, lay the secret of his magnetism.

I broke out in sweat.

What was wrong with me? Where was all this sudden restlessness coming from?

Enough! I chided myself. *Don't be so petty, it's a good story, try to remember every word so you can write it all down when you get home.*

"After a month wandering back and forth between government bureaus and military offices, we finally got married in a small-scale ceremony," Nadim continued, and I kept listening.

"Laila has been living in Jerusalem ever since; she has a visa that expires if she leaves Israel. She's cooped up in the house, she's not allowed to work, she can't visit her family anymore because Gaza has been considered a 'foreign country' ever since the Oslo Accord."

Nadim had stopped glancing at me and now leaned back in his chair, raising his chin and looking up to the sky as Michelle and I looked at each other. Her angry glare oozed down my face. She turned around to find the waiter, waived him over, and ordered three prosciutto plates before reproaching me with her eyes again.

I would have loved to shake Nadim, but the whole reason we had come here was to talk about our book and film.

"Laila's father was admitted to the hospital six months ago, to the cancer ward," Nadim continued, speaking only with Michelle and still ignoring me. "Since then, I've been busy trying to get a permit to travel to Gaza. I've asked friends for help, I've asked friends of colleagues and people at nonprofits, but nothing has helped. It's crazy when you think about it that the distance between Jerusalem and Gaza is no longer than two hours by car, including roadblocks. But it's bitterly painful that Laila will presumably never see her father again."

"Kafka," Michelle mumbled a second time. The look she gave me was hostile.

Apparently he was here to tell his story, I was here merely as an accessory. Also a sort of coproduction, but

things couldn't work that way. Without me.

I wanted to suggest he make a film with Maria, financed by the generous Michelle. And I hoped he would read my mind.

"Sometimes I can't believe it's been fourteen years," he continued, still addressing Michelle. "Every year in July, Laila and I will leave the house one morning at five with a picnic basket full of provisions to go and wait at the Ministry of the Interior for the official who decides our fate.

"While we wait, I usually tell Laila, 'Look at what a beautiful summer day it is. Just imagine us heading to the beach with a picnic basket full of delicious food, spending a beautiful day together, returning home later sunned and satisfied.' And later when it's finally our turn to answer hours on end of questions about our lives as a couple and as individuals—they even want to know every possible detail about our children, they might other people's children, after all—that's when I whisper to Laila, 'And now imagine us sailing a boat atop the waves of the sea, and a small squall blows in.' I won't let her fall into the water, I won't let her sink until the official finally signs the permit for her to stay in Israel for another year, granting us happiness for the next twelve months."

"Kafka," Michelle said, repeating her mantra.

Kafka, I thought as well.

He's the prosecutor, I'm the accused.

I looked at Michelle, who ignored me again. I wonder what her father did in the war, I thought. Probably saved Jewish children. I was sure my eyes were blazing with suppressed rage.

I imagined standing in a courtroom and bellowing at Judge Michelle behind the bench that the blood of this vendetta had effused over me on the day of my birth, and there was nothing I could do about it. I pleaded into the angry face of the elegant judge how I was a victim as well—a victim of circumstance, of politicians, of interests, a victim of God. I said I wanted to live the way she did, in a country like Belgium, Switzerland, or France! And I wondered how many women from Gaza would be granted citizenship by Michelle's country.

How lucky she is! She gets to be a Righteous Person among the Nations—at our expense. But just as I was about to scream, I turned my eyes from her to Nadim.

His eyes had darkened, his forehead had furrowed, his shoulders had slumped. Although anger threatened to inundate me, I could see how weighed-down Nadim felt. He had taken Michelle for himself, but he didn't show any pleasure, any triumph in it, and I thought I could hear Dvora still begging me to keep my mouth shut.

I shifted around on my chair, it was hard to obey Dvora's command. I started fiddling with the saltshaker to cover up my tension and resentment until I scattered all the salt out onto the table.

The waiter materialized to eliminate the mess.

I felt as though he didn't like me very much either, and I urgently hoped Nadim would finally notice I was about to explode.

"No one actually understands what it really means for Laila not to be able to leave Jerusalem and travel anywhere, anywhere in the whole world," Nadim said with a quick glance my way. "No one understands what

it really means for a person not to have citizenship.”

The waiter served the main course—sliced teriyaki salmon on a bed of chopped butterhead lettuce and a side of rice with cranberries and pine nuts. Between one bite and the next, Nadim explained to Michelle that Laila didn't have any official identification. All she had was a Palestinian passport, which is why she needed a special permit to travel to Gaza at all. “She can come back to Jerusalem only with the arbitrary permission of the Israeli authorities—or not at all,” he said and then fell silent, distracted, as Michelle again mumbled “Kafka” while shooting me another of her hostile glares.

I didn't touch my food, it was clear that Michelle Peterson had passed her sentence and knew exactly what was good and what was evil here. Drawing comparisons with the Nazis was popular, and she had consciously come to the Middle East to find out which of us was playing the role of Nazi.

I fell into some uncertain sort of limbo. I was sailing on the horizon, following the incessant waves of the sea—and then Nadim slid his hand under the table to tap me, almost resting hand on my thigh.

“Listen, my love,” he said, his words bringing me back.

And even though he was still focusing on Michelle, I felt he was speaking to me now too. He was saying he had recently had a night of insomnia imagining himself, Laila, and the children leaving their homeland. “Closing my eyes, I pictured my father slowly fading away, and I knew that ownership of our land and possessions would transfer to the State of Israel, because there are no heirs apart from me—my sisters long ago lost the right to return, or even visit again. In the past few months I've been to see our family doctor several times, he takes my blood pressure knowing nothing of my nightmares. Because who is there for me to tell all of this to?” For a moment Nadim stared only at me, and inside I felt shaken.

Who was there for him to really confide his worries in? I thought. Laila, who was already deep in depression? His confused father, helpless in the face of this situation? His relatives, each of whom bore his or her own story?

“Recently,” he said to Michelle but meant me, “my doctor diagnosed me with anxiety, and he put me on a prescription for an anti-anxiety med.”

Michelle sighed, whispering another “Kafka” up into the air, and then asked Nadim what he'd like for dessert. At his request, she ordered one panna cotta and three spoons. At least when it came to the tableware she hadn't forgotten me. I stole their dessert, and when she realized she had missed the last little bit of whipped cream now melting on my tongue, she sighed in frustration.

The waiter served the coffees we had ordered, also leaving the check on the table.

Nadim and Michelle were engrossed in their conversation. I was the only one who took out a credit card. She kept on talking, ignoring both me and the waiter, who had already returned for payment. He took my card and went to the register.

So that's it, I thought, deciding Michelle did not understand and would never understand that our story was complex. She had no idea that, in our country, we had no strong nor weak, no good nor evil. In our country we had only an illogical symmetry, in our country everyone was right in his and her own way, and everyone



hurt each other in the name of that rectitude.

I stood to go.

Nadim and Michelle thanked me for paying and also stood.

I reluctantly left a tip for the waiter, who hadn't liked me.

The convict must cover the court costs shot through my head.

Walking back to the car, I couldn't manage to curb my inner turmoil, my anger, my astonishment. I didn't know whom I was actually angry at, who or what had so offended me. Was it Nadim, who hadn't mentioned his film and my book? Or the fact that I had paid for everyone's meal? Or maybe Michelle's hostility?

I was confused and wondered if I wasn't directing my anger at Dvora too, who had ordered me to be silent. And at myself, because I had stayed silent. But maybe, because of all this silence, I had actually understood something new.

We walked down the street not saying a word; my usual migraine checked in, which at least helped push the scattered thoughts out of my mind.

When we got close to the car, Nadim slowed his steps, and it seemed like he wanted to say something. I hoped he would thank me for my silence and explain that tonight hadn't been about the film or the book, all he'd wanted to do tonight was save Laila. I wanted so much for him to appease my anger and my grievement—and thereby my migraine.

He took my hand; I stopped. He took a deep breath and asked, "Who the fuck is Kafka?"