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THOUGH IT WAS THE END OF SUMMER, the heat still waited outside front doors along with the morning newspaper, both boding ill. So sequestered in their air-conditioned homes were the people of the city that, when it came time for the seasons to change, they didn't feel the newly autumn-tinged air. And perhaps autumn might have come and gone unnoticed if the long sleeves suddenly appearing in shop windows hadn't announced its arrival.

Standing in front of one of those windows now was a young girl, her reflection looking back at her from the glass – a bit short, a bit freckled. The mannequins peering at her from behind the glass were tall and pretty, and perhaps that was why the girl made off quickly. A flock of pigeons took flight above her with a surprised flapping of wings. The girl muttered an apology as she continued walking, and the pigeons, having already forgotten what had frightened them, returned to perch on a nearby bench. At the entrance to the bank, a line of people snaked its way to the ATM. A deaf-mute beggar stood beside them, hand extended, and they pretended to be blind. When the girl's gaze momentarily met his, she once again mumbled an apology and hurried on, she didn't want to be late for her shift. As she was about to cross the square, a loud honk made her stop in her tracks and a large bus hurtled angrily past her. A poster on the back wished her a happy New Year. The Rosh Hashana holiday was still a week away, but the streets were already filled with promises

of big sales. Across the street, three girls her age were snapping pictures in front of the fountain, their laughter ricocheting off the paving stones. As she listened, she told herself over and over again, “I don’t mind walking alone, I don’t mind it at all.”

She crossed the square quickly. Inside shops, red-haired saleswomen said, *It looks lovely on you*, adding, *If I were you, I’d take two*, as they stole glances at the clock. Bladders bursting, they could barely wait for their break. A charming young man stood at the counter, ringing up sales on the cash register with fingers that had run through his boyfriend’s hair earlier that morning. Customers left the shops, their swinging bags twisting around each other, creating an urban rustling that was as much a harbinger of autumn as the rustle of leaves falling from treetops.

In the adjacent ice-cream parlour, the girl went behind the glass counter and began handing spoons of ice cream to those who wanted to taste, knowing that the summer vacation was about to end and no one had yet tasted her, the only girl in her class still a virgin, and next summer, when the fields yellowed, she would be wearing a soldier’s army green.

Now she handed an ice-cream cone to the little boy standing in front of her and tried hard to smile as she said for the thousandth time that week, “Here you are.” The next person in line asked to taste the fig sorbet. Nofar knew right away that he wouldn’t buy fig sorbet, he would only taste it, along with ten other flavours, and in the end he’d ask for chocolate. Nonetheless, she scooped a bit of fig sorbet onto a plastic spoon and glanced quickly at the clock above the counter. Only seven more hours to go.

At that very moment, the door opened and they stepped inside. She had been waiting the entire summer for this moment and had even written about it in great detail in her notebook: Yotam would come in and be surprised to see her there. She would offer

him ice cream free of charge, and in return he would offer her a ride home on his motorcycle. She would say that she still had a few hours left on her shift, and he would say that a few hours wasn't a long time to wait. But when the moment finally arrived, three days before the end of the summer vacation, Yotam didn't come in alone. He was surrounded by his crew of friends. And one of them was Shir, who, until four months ago, had still been Nofar's friend. Nofar's only friend, to be precise.

The five of them stood there, and although they weren't particularly good-looking as individuals, standing there at the counter they seemed to Nofar to be incredibly beautiful. They shone with the glow of being a clique, as if the fact that there were five of them made each of them appear at least five times more beautiful. They examined the row of flavours spread out before them, trying to decide, and for a moment Nofar dared to hope they wouldn't recognize her. But finally Yotam raised his beautiful eyes from the ice cream to the counter, frowned slightly and said, "Hey, you go to school with us." The others looked up. Nofar fought the urge to avert her eyes. "You're in Shir's class, right?" Moran asked as she pulled her hair back into a ponytail in a gesture that was as ordinary as it was charming. Nofar nodded quickly. Yes. She was in Shir's class. In fact, she had sat next to Shir since the second grade, until that morning four months ago when she arrived at school to find that Shir had fired her without even a letter of warning.

There was a moment of silence before Yotam said, "So, I'll take cookie dough." Nofar had already begun piling ice cream into a cup when he said, "In a cone." And that, in fact, was all Yotam said to her because immediately after that the others began telling her what flavours and toppings they wanted, and Moran added in a tone brimming with insincere amiability that

they needed to get their ice cream in a hurry because the film they wanted to see started in twenty minutes. And all the while, Shir stood silently looking at Nofar, a small expression of guilt on her face, until she finally said she'd have vanilla. She didn't have to say it, Nofar knew what flavour Shir liked. Five minutes later they were already outside, on their way to the film. Nofar looked at the sorbets displayed under the counter in flowering layers of red and orange. Dozens of fingerprints covered the glass partition in front of her, all made by fingers pointing at the ice cream, never at her.

The glass door opened and a gang of noisy children burst inside. When this day was over, she'd play music she liked, not the songs that Gaby insisted attracted customers. She'd still have to pick up all the napkins people had dropped and the sticky spoons parents hadn't felt like throwing away after their kids finished their ice cream. She'd still have to wash the floor, scrub the fingerprints off the partition and take out the waste bins, but it would be her music in the background. Then she'd fill a styrofoam box with ice cream and take it to the homeless guy who stood near the fountain. Or maybe she'd just put it down not far from him, because the last time she went up to him he had shouted some garbled words at her that she didn't completely understand.

She'd been dreaming too long about the homeless guy and the ice cream, and about the gang at the cinema without her, because when she looked around she saw that the kids had taken off with their ice cream without paying. Gaby would deduct it from her salary. A large lump of misery filled her throat and she took a deep breath and swallowed it whole. Six and a half hours to go. If only this day would end already.

She didn't know that this day would end differently from all the days she had known before, that this day would change all

the days that followed, that this was absolutely the last day she would be nothing more than a drab ice-cream server.

She weighed 3.4 kilograms at birth. Beyond that, there was nothing to say about her, simply because a moment before that she hadn't existed. The people who, a moment earlier, had been called Ronit and Ami and were now called Mom and Dad, looked at her through a haze of emotion. The birth had taken nineteen hours, and at its conclusion Ronit's vocal chords were almost as frayed as Ami's eardrums. The newborn baby girl lying between them was very red and very wrinkled, but the delivery nurse told them it was only temporary, "She'll be beautiful!" she said, "like a flower!" It wasn't clear what the source of the nurse's prophetic confidence was, but the parents accepted her words as fact. Ronit picked up the baby gently, astonished at those 3.4 kilograms that only a short time earlier had been part of her own body weight and now existed on their own. "We'll call her Nofar," Ronit said in a hoarse voice, "and she'll be beautiful!" Ami was quick to nod, "A flower!" The nurse went off to other rooms and other deliveries. And so, before she was ten minutes old, the baby girl had a prophecy and a name that meant "water lily".

Choosing a baby's name is no small matter. The first tiny cells are only just beginning to divide in the womb and the parents are already divided in their opinions: one wants Tamir and the other demands Daniel, one insists on Michal and the other decrees Yael. It would be better to wait for the cells to mature into an actual creature so that the name is born from the person instead of the person being born into the name. But parents, unable to control themselves, are driven by their hopes and expectations

to plunge ahead, and hopes and expectations have a way of outdistancing reality, creating so large a gap that the child is left behind, forever running to catch up to her parents' dreams for her. Nofar wasn't ugly. Far from it. But the delivery nurse had said, "Beautiful!" and that prophecy had pursued her from infancy. She grew up to be a timid, withdrawn young girl who lived in the world as if she were an uninvited guest at a party. Now, standing behind the counter in the ice-cream parlour, she recalled that moment when Yotam and his friends had come in and he had recognized her. "Hey, you go to school with us." It was clear to her that he hadn't known her name. And that he hadn't cared enough to ask.

When the stream of customers in the ice-cream parlour slowed to a trickle, Nofar took the key that was hanging on a hook like a suicide and hurried outside to the employees' toilet in the alley. A pair of alley cats stopped copulating for a moment to glance angrily at her, and then, with a wave of their tails, went back to their business. Nofar squeezed into the narrow cubicle and closed the door quickly, as if it weren't two cats she had just seen copulating, but, heaven forbid, her parents.

When she left the cubicle she straightened her blue dress with a trembling hand. She had borrowed it from her sister at the beginning of the summer. How hopeful she had been then that it wasn't only the dress she was borrowing, but also the charm required to carry off wearing it. Her younger sister moved with such grace, such fluidity that the city's traffic lights blushed with pleasure whenever she approached. The already traffic-congested streets grew even more congested because the lights became flooded with such a red wave of lust that traffic was forced to a standstill. And so Maya strolled from one pedestrian green light to another without ever having to

wait, not even at the busiest intersections. But for Nofar it was different. She always waited.

When they were infants, people couldn't tell them apart. Nofar was less than a year older than her sister, and Maya closed the gap with the speed of a gazelle. She was born prematurely, and though the doctors attributed that to Ronit's emotional state (her husband was called to active reserve duty when she was in the last stages of pregnancy), the birth was actually premature because the baby inside was so eager to be equal to the one outside. The timid ice-cream server was not the least bit timid then. On the contrary. Plump and smooth as butter custard, reaching out with tiny hands to clutch any finger extended to her, the world was hers to grasp and taste. The word "daddy" was sweetening under her tongue, ripening slowly, a first gift to her parents to be given at the right moment. But when that moment came, her father was gone and her mother, who at first had been as bright as a summer dawn, now flitted around the house like an agitated bird. Nofar knew the story well, family members told it regularly, and just as she learnt at school to stand to attention when the anthem was played, she followed the rules of the ritual whenever she heard that family anthem, listening with her head bowed at the sound of the familiar words and mumbling, "Thank God" at the appropriate times. *Thank God*, that when the ambulance took Mom, the neighbour called Dad immediately. *Thank God*, Dad managed to get to the phone a minute before the ground operation began. *Thank God*, that when the commander heard about Dad's new baby girl he gave him a twelve-hour pass, and – here saying "Thank God" was not allowed, she'd fallen into that trap once and her mother had shot her a withering glance – *who would have believed it*, right after Dad left, his tank crossed into Lebanon and everyone was killed, *thank*

God Maya's birth saved Dad. As the years passed, the last sentence became slightly shortened to simply: *thank God, Maya saved Dad.* Not Maya's birth, the medical event. Not the commander, who had given him a pass. Maya had saved Dad. Everyone knew it and everyone talked about it, and when Nofar finally said the word "daddy" they barely noticed. Because that's just how it is, all babies eventually say "daddy", but not all babies rescue their fathers from a burning tank.

On her first day of work at the ice-cream parlour, Nofar left her house wearing Maya's dress, in better spirits than usual. For the first time in her life she had a chance to begin everything anew, and there was no better place for it than the ice-cream parlour, that wonderland of flavours and colours, as if someone had managed to trap a rainbow, attach a door at the front and a cash register at the back and place it on a street corner. Her parents had praised her for deciding to work during the summer vacation, but she hadn't done it only for the money. It was for the people that she went there, a fifty-minute ride from her house in the suburbs. It was for the welcome eyes of strangers who didn't know what the neighbourhood knew about her: that there was nothing to know about her. That nothing had ever happened to her. No adventures. No misadventures. A marginal, harmless existence that was now seventeen years old.

Even the pimples on her face weren't enough to make her unique. There are teenagers who have truly exciting geological formations on their face: deep craters, unforgettable hills and valleys. Nofar's sebaceous glands, however, behaved moderately, satisfied to appropriate only her forehead and a small enclave on her nose. But the pimples, though they bothered no one else, bothered Nofar herself quite a bit. In her mind, she called herself "zit face".

Names and nicknames are very dangerous things. Lavi Maimon, who lived on the fourth floor of the building that housed the ice-cream parlour, could tell you that. Despite all the scoops of chocolate that had rolled around in his stomach, he was still as skinny as the bars of the bicycle racks the city installs on the streets. Perhaps he could have borne the humiliation of his existence if his parents had given him a name that was easier to live up to than Lavi, which means lion, but he carried the burden of the king of the jungle himself on his skinny shoulders. As a child, Lavi had waited for the mane to grow in and the muscles to develop under his skin when he finally reached his teens. But the years passed and the hair refused to grow – he had only fourteen hairs on his chin, he counted them in front of the mirror every night – and as for the muscles, well, forget it. His father, Lieutenant-Colonel in the reserves Arieh Maimon, ran his business with the same iron fist he had once used to command his soldiers. And just as Arieh Maimon's soldiers had kept climbing the hill because they were less afraid of the terrorists shooting at them from above than they were of their hot-tempered commander below, so the stock of the company Arieh Maimon had founded after his discharge also continued to climb well beyond every economic forecast because it feared the fiery glance of its commander.

Lieutenant-Colonel Arieh Maimon did not give his son the name Lavi. That decision was made by his wife, a beautiful young woman who admired her husband, the country and her Pilates teacher, not necessarily in that order. Since she was especially fond of the name, her husband generously allowed her to make the choice. As the boy grew into a teenager, it was clear that he did not possess even a smidgen of his father's predatory charm. If there was any connection between him and the world of large

felines, it was only as a potential meal. In his son's early years, the father still roared at him and pierced him with the same look that had once driven his soldiers and then his stock upward. But after a while he stopped doing even that. Lavi began to miss the loud reprimands, even the roars. Anything was better than the silence, the quiet that followed the disappointment.

In the evening, as his mother made her ablutions in preparation for her Pilates class and his father purred contentedly in front of the TV, Lavi opened the window in his room and looked down at the street. The urban river rushed by below him, gangs of teenagers on vacation bobbing and lurching in the current. Hearing their laughter, he asked himself whether they would keep laughing if his body landed beside them, a dull thud on the paving stones. Whether the girls would bend to help, run slim fingers over his short-cropped hair, the disappointing mane. Whether they would finally look at him – if not with compassion, then at least with interest – take out their mobile phones and snap a picture of the sprawled body, its arms embracing the street, arms that had never embraced a girl.

And so, every evening the city adorned itself with the glitter of street lights and Lavi Maimon stood at the window contemplating his death, thinking about the many faces that would look at him when he landed near the entrance to the ice-cream parlour. He would have tried his hand at that sort of flight a long time ago if the summer military operation on the southern border hadn't begun, flooding the city with sirens and filling all the newspapers. To be buried somewhere on the back pages was not what he wanted. He preferred to wait for the fighting to end. And thank God, it never did: it stopped in the south only to begin again in the north. Lavi woke up every morning and saw that the newspaper was filled with the same stories that had

filled its predecessor the day before. How would they find room for the story of his failed attempt to fly? So he postponed his death from day to day, and though the military operation cost many lives, it did at least save the life of one city boy.

As Lavi groaned under the name of the lion crouching on his shoulders, Nofar Shalev also buckled under the burden of her name. Why in the world had she believed that here, in the ice-cream parlour of all places, she would finally blossom into a different Nofar? Every morning she stood behind the counter. Summer came to the city, had its merry, sweaty way with it, and now that autumn was approaching, everything had a façade of respectability once again. In another few days, Nofar would go back to school without a single exciting story from the ice-cream parlour in the city except for the ones she wrote in her notebook. How much she had hoped for a brazen love affair with a student, or a tourist, or a heavily pierced bad boy. When she returned to school he would wait outside the gates for her, she would run to him and everyone would see. Including Shir. And Yotam. Nofar had been prepared for anything but returning to her senior year with empty hands, with fingers that had never touched a boy's except to give him change. If she had at least found a girlfriend here to replace Shir. Anything to be the entire focus, even for a moment, of someone's gaze.

On the fourth floor, Lavi Maimon stood looking down at the street. In the alley stood Nofar Shalev, her hands straightening her dress, neither one aware of the fact that they were not alone in suffering the humiliation of a name they could never live up to. It might have been easier if they had known that somewhere – on the other side of the planet, or four floors away – someone was enduring the same pain. Or it might not have been easier at all, just as someone with toothache feels no



relief at hearing the moans of the person sitting next to him in the dentist's waiting room.

Although Lavi Maimon and Nofar Shalev knew nothing about each other, they both sighed forlornly at precisely the same moment. The only difference between them was that Lavi continued to stand at the window while Nofar, suddenly realizing that she was late getting back from her break, began running. She ran quickly, almost as if she knew that it wasn't only to the ice-cream parlour that she was hurrying now, but to the moment when everything would change, to the fate that already awaited her on the other side of the counter.