GREATER THAN A WALL

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GREATER THAN A WALL

CARL GIBEILY

AKKADIA
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Greater than a Wall

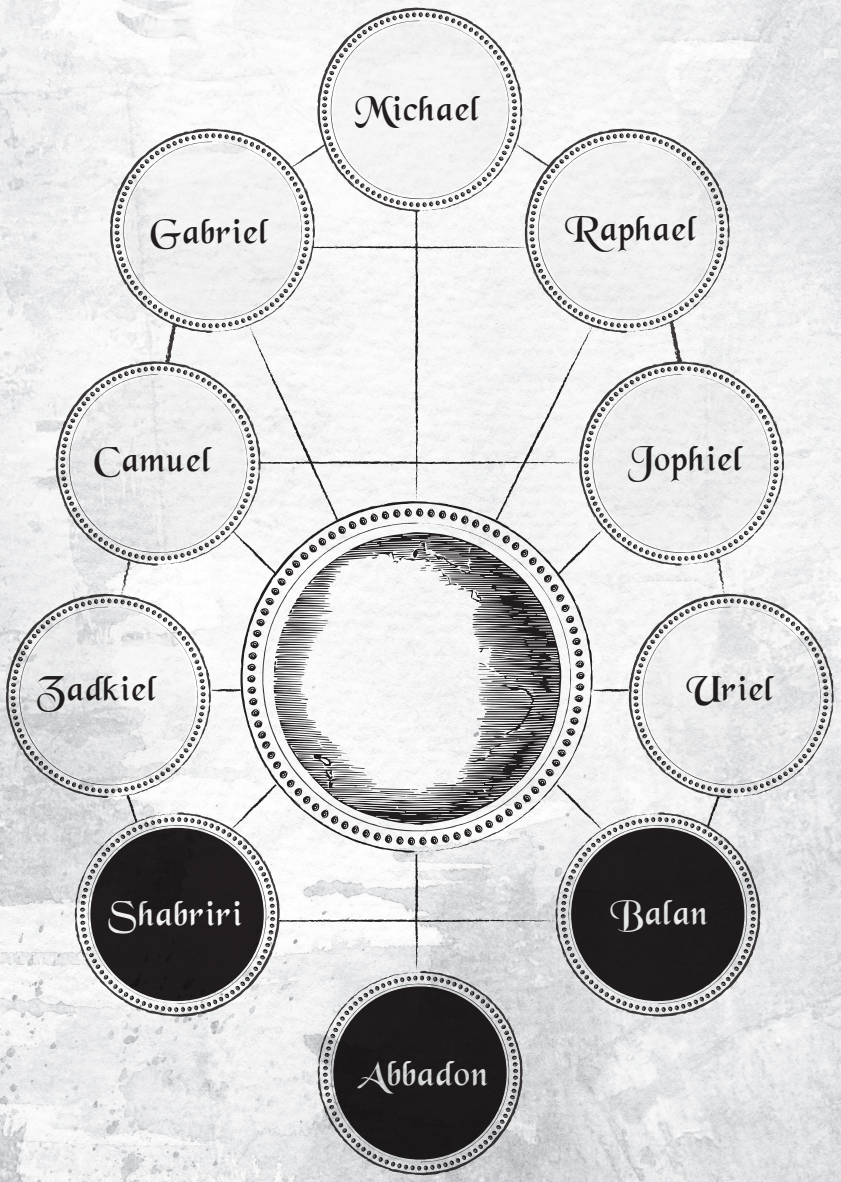
Carl Gibeily was born in Lebanon in 1966. After school in Beirut, he read engineering at Cambridge University, and worked as a confectionery salesman in Dubai, a journalist and UN editor in Beirut and Bahrain, and a Bloomsbury editor in Doha. Carl is now about as Scottish as anyone in Edinburgh, where he lives with his wife and two children. His first novel, *Blueprint for a Prophet*, was published by Doubleday to critical acclaim.

Author's Note

As a matter of form, novels usually run disclaimers to emphasize the fictitious nature of the characters and events, stressing that any similarity to actual events or persons is purely coincidental. In this case this is not completely true. While the story of the Israeli family is entirely a work of fiction, that of the Palestinian family is partly factual if fully dramatized: the rapid sequence of events that stemmed from the construction of the separation wall between Israel and the West Bank is all too true. I came across the story of that family in the course of editing and fact-checking a particular UN document, and my only legal tweak has been to change all the names of the members of that family. Theirs is only one story among so many countless others, and if history teaches us anything — including the most recent history of Brexit and Trump's US — it is that events that seem to happen at breakneck speed are in fact the climax of years of simmering complacency and xenophobia.

Carl Gibeily
Edinburgh, June 2017

For Anne, Elissa, Terry, Albert, Caius and Kyrâh:
a cluster of cedars among pines


Michael
Gabriel
Raphael
Camuel
Jophiel
Zadkiel
Uriel
Shabriri
Balan
Abbadon

Budapest, 1956

THE HOSPITAL'S TANNOY relayed the radio broadcast, filling the wards and corridors with patriotic songs non-stop for two days, with only brief interruptions for newsflashes. On this, the third day, the tone changed abruptly and the rolling drums faded into a gentle melody of hope and prayer. In the maternity wing, a man paced the corridor nervously, waiting for news of his wife's delivery. He heard the change and stopped in his tracks to stare at the closest speaker. He reached into a pocket of his grey suit for a cigarette, which he put mechanically in his mouth. His eyes still on the speaker, he lit his cigarette and inhaled deeply.

It was an old Christmas carol that was being played two months before Christmas. The man hummed the tune and exhaled through his nose, the smoke dancing with the words

from the tannoy: '*Csoda fia szarvas, ezer ága boga —' Boy stag of wonder, with horns of a thousand branches —*

He turned to look at the only other person in the corridor, whose wife had been rushed into the delivery room at the same time as his. The man was seated on one of three wooden chairs, his legs crossed and cheek resting on a hand. His beard was so thick and bushy that the fingers of his hand seemed consumed by it. But it was the man's calm disposition that attracted the smoker's attention: oblivious to the song and to the sound of the angry crowds on the street below, the man's eyes were riveted to a sheet of paper on the middle seat.

Outside, flags and banners had invaded the streets of the city for a third consecutive day. Some of the protesters had hunting rifles and old muskets. But the vast majority were armed only with rocks, which they threw in defiance at the advancing tanks. The crowd roared when the leading tank rumbled to a halt, and then fell abruptly silent as the turret was lowered to aim point blank at them.

'*A thousand branches and of a thousand bright candles — '*

The bearded man blinked at his sheet and let out a deep sigh.

The demonstrators hurled stones, which, in an instant, were lost in a sea of sound, pyrotechnics, flesh and collapsed masonry. And, for that instant, the banners and flags blew more fiercely in the apparent wind.

'*Among its horns it carries the light of the blessed sun. On its forehead is a star, on its chest the moon — '*

Driven by curiosity, the man in the grey suit drew closer

to peer at the sheet. It was a list of names, arranged in a neat oval around a larger name, like a snapshot of a planet with its family of moons. He read the central name, written in bold: Áron Lunzer. 'A fine time to bring a baby into the world, eh?' he said, blowing smoke down.

A cloud of dust rose high above the banners, grew arches that were more pointed than the Gothic towers of Parliament House, and slowly turned eastwards, away from the green Danube.

'*And it starts along the banks of the shining heavenly Danube — '*

Józsi Lunzer looked up and, moving his hand away from his beard, declined the cigarette that was being offered.

'We haven't chosen a name yet either,' said the man. He paused to hum a snatch of the song before adding, 'A strange time to be choosing a name, no?'

Barely a mile away, due east from Parliament Square, the windows of the Central Hospital on the corner of Varosligeti and Fasor Avenues shook dangerously.

'*That it may be the messenger of heaven and bringer of news — '*

Both men jumped at the sound of the first explosion, and the man in the grey suit sat suddenly on the third chair as his knees gave way.

'Áron,' said Józsi simply.

'Hmm?' There was a shocked lull after that first explosion; even the radio had been momentarily silenced. The man gazed at the tannoy with dismay.

'I am expecting a son,' explained Józsi, 'and he will be called Áron.'

The station repeated the Christmas carol and the man lit another cigarette with the stub of the first. He gave a non-committal shrug and, picking up the sheet of paper between them to Józsi's suprise, pointed at one of the names in orbit. 'Why not this one?' he asked. 'That's a good name. It was my grandfather's name. We might choose it if we get a son.'

Józsi looked over at the name in the first quadrant of midheaven. 'Raphael is an exceedingly good name,' he agreed. 'He is the angel of healing.'

Now the explosions were coming in rapid succession, causing the windows to resonate dangerously.

Józsi continued undeterred, 'And we will need a lot of healing after today.' He tugged at his beard as he added darkly, 'My brother is out there.'

The man nodded and they sat in silence for a while.

The choice of song, now repeated in an endless loop, was worth a thousand commentaries.

It was an old Christmas carol that had come to haunt them from a deeper, purer past when bards still roamed the streets of the great Empire. It sang of an era when there were no communists, of an age that was untainted by the anti-comintern pact with Germany, and of a time well before the annexations and dismemberments of Hungarian territories by Czechoslovakia, Romania, Russia and Yugoslavia.

'*Szarva között hozza áldot napnak fényét — '*

Moreover, it was an old Christmas carol that was being played two months to the day before Christmas of 1956 as

though the radio station, in addition to every ordinary Hungarian, instinctively knew that the song would be banned this and many other Nativities to come.

The man in the grey suit handed the sheet back and broke the silence. 'Just get your family home safely today. That's more important than names.'

Józsi shook his head fervently. 'Nothing except God is more important. Without names we are unthinking and unloving beasts.'

The man shrugged again. 'You think the Soviets outside will only kill Konráds and Konstantins?'

'It's not enough to have a given name.' Józsi pointed at the central name in bold and then indicated the scattering of names. 'Every living human soul has an ascending name whether they are conscious of it or not. Parents choose the given name and society selects the family name, but it is God who disposes the point of purpose. That is the ascending name. That is the true first name.'

'What do you mean?' The man was only half listening; he was more interested in the voices outside that were growing more urgent.

Like a hounded beast, an acrid black plume was slowly engulfing Budapest.

Still indicating the names around Áron Lunzer, Józsi said, 'These are the principal angels and fallen angels, each with a characteristic. And each child that is born to the world comes with the gift or curse of that characteristic for all eternity.'

'So — like astrology?'

The black smoke turned to the maternity wing of the Central Hospital.

'This has nothing to do with stars,' replied Józsi tersely and fell abruptly quiet.

'So?' prompted the man after some time.

It was Józsi's turn to shrug. 'It's complicated,' he said simply. It was also secret. He had almost shared, in a moment of weakness, what had taken the finest Talmudic minds many generations to work out. In the constant state of war between the sons of light and the sons of darkness, if you were born blessed with Raphael or Gabriel as your ascending master, then you would forever fight those who carried the mark of the fallen angels, such as Shabriri, the demon of blindness, and Abaddon the destroyer.

As if on cue, a shell exploded on Fasor Avenue causing all the windows to buckle and shatter and the building to shake. This was followed, two seconds later, by a swarm of flying shrapnel pocking the outer walls of the hospital.

'I just can't see,' breathed Józsi with genuine fear. The God-given name for any human soul could only be glimpsed through prayer and meditation — the letters on a page eventually glowing brighter than the other angelic names. He had used this venerable knowledge to infer the names of his closest kin, such as his kind brother, Áron, after whom he was naming his son, who was guided by Camuel, the angel of tolerance and love; and Dorika, his wife, born with the angel of ministration — Uriel — in her spirits. 'For the first time since I know the way, I can't see. And it's my own son's name

that is hidden,' he moaned. He realized suddenly that he had said this out loud and he turned to glance at his neighbour.

But the man had stopped listening with the blast. Curled up in his seat, both hands were buried in his ears.

Inside the delivery room, Dorika screamed as the obstetrician almost casually extracted a blue baby boy.

The acrid smoke that had blown in from Parliament Square paused for barely a second at the broken window and the venetian blind that had been kept shut. A black finger tentatively moved between the slats and entered the room in time to fill the newborn's lungs with its first breath of air.

The baby opened his mouth and coughed.

Dorika sat up. 'What's wrong?' she cried, 'Why is he coughing, doctor?'

'Poor thing. What a shame,' murmured the attending nurse and she whisked the baby away, repeating, '*De kar*.'

1

Jerusalem, 1997

Aron Lunzer and his son, Avi, waited to be admitted to the Western Wall plaza. Access to the site, the holiest in Judaism, was usually effortless. The large concrete security gates at the entrance to the plaza had been specifically designed to provide protection from would-be suicide bombers while catering for a steady stream of Jewish pilgrims, devout habitués, bar mitzvah parties and foreign tourists.

But on the morning of 1 January 1997, the sheer number of visitors had put a spoke in the system, causing a tight bottleneck at the gate. It seemed to Aron that at least half the city's residents and all its foreign tourists had spontaneously resolved to mark the new Gregorian year by visiting the Wailing Wall. They waited in a line that was as chaotic and tortuous as the adjoining alleyways of the Jewish quarter, shuffling forward a painful shuffle every five minutes.

Aron hated crowds almost as much as he hated wearing a yarmulke. It wasn't so much the hubbub of a thousand conversations taking place simultaneously, or the way that crowds moved in discrete pockets, like particles collecting in a pipe before being impelled onward by the next cluster. Aron certainly found those irritating enough, but what he absolutely could not tolerate with a visceral vengeance was the smell that crowds always seemed to exude. Crowd odours moved through space just like background noise, through crests and troughs along much the same air channels. It was as if people in groups lost their distinctive odours to a collective super-stench that gathered in whorls around Aron's head.

The resulting mixture affected him to such a degree that he couldn't make out individual smells even in his immediate vicinity. He was therefore about as likely to trace the cheap cologne to the American tourist behind him or the unwashed smell to the group of ultra-orthodox Jews in front of him as he was of picking out any single conversation from the mass. He began to breathe through his mouth in order to ward off an all-too-familiar itch.

It wasn't his olfactory system that was under assault; it was his throat. If anything, breathing through the mouth provided a more direct route to the back of his throat — where the hard Semitic ĥ is formed — and therefore only hastened the inevitable.

He gave a little cough, hoping to clear his throat. The ultra-orthodox *haredim* in front, dressed in black, shuffled forward.

Ever since childhood, Aron's body reacted to invisible particles in the air — strong smells and especially dust. It would start in the throat and emerge in the range of a mild cough to a gut-splitting retch. On very rare occasions, the cough had even developed into a stream of vomit.

Aron coughed a couple more times, causing one of the *haredim* to glance at him unkindly and to indicate the security gate several metres away as if to say there was no cause to be impatient.

Smells alone usually didn't cause the balance to tip to the retch scale. But Aron's constitution had chosen that particular day and moment to prove the rule. His hand shot into a pocket for an inhaler as he felt the onset of a fit. Unlike asthmatics, it was his throat that suffered from regular bouts of inflammation. His lungs and bronchial tubes were as healthy as any non-smoker's living in the ambient pollution of Jerusalem. While stress could induce these spasms, more than anything else it was plain dust or strong fumes that caused Aron to heave. So the inhaler was more for the psychological comfort it accorded him than for any actual physiological benefit. It could not tame the cough, but it did sometimes prevent it from developing into an all-consuming retch.

Now the coughs were coming seconds apart and with increasing intensity.

'Soon pass,' Aron spluttered mechanically to no one in particular.

But he started to cough so violently that everyone within earshot turned sharply in his direction. In this age of suicide

maniacs, every loud noise was immediately suspicious and put people on edge. Those who were close enough focused on the child with the man and noted that he seemed completely unperturbed by the fit.

Aron was now doubled over, coughing and retching helplessly.

The sea of people took a synchronized step away, parting on either side of the man, who, if not possessed, was visibly suffering from some mysterious biological ailment.

The American with the cheap cologne cupped a hand to his mouth to urge the people ahead to move faster through security, and then used the same hand as a makeshift mask. His call was picked up by several others, including the ultra-orthodox *haredim*.

Between coughs, Aron could hear his young son, Avi, explaining his dust and smell allergy to complete strangers.

'It's true,' Avi repeated to two soldiers who appeared at the scene to investigate the commotion. 'He's just allergic to dust.' He nodded fervently as if to confirm a clearly outlandish lie and added one of Aron's pet phrases: 'A patented dustometre — that's what he is.'

There were a few advantages to being a patented dustometre. For instance, Aron had been allowed to work mostly from home, where he had a diligent cleaner who understood his particular affliction and who went about the flat searching and destroying all the dust particles in their hideouts. His allergy also provided a perfect excuse to turn down invitations to boring office parties or school gatherings. He

would shake his head sadly and provide some weary response that would elicit an immediate apology from the inviter, as though they should have known better than to put him in this awkward position by inviting him.

Being a leper in the middle of a crowd also meant that no one batted an eyelid — actually there was a collective sigh of relief — when the two soldiers led Aron and Avi to the front of the queue and straight through security.

'Cool,' said Avi delighted, with a backward glance.

Aron's throat became marginally less inflamed as they stepped onto the large plaza and away from the mass of bodies at the gate, but his voice was still hoarse and his agreement sounded more like a grunt.

The Western Wall plaza, the largest open space in all of Jerusalem, was massive enough to accommodate thousands without the jostle of elbows and smells. Aron was just relieved to be away from the crowd and he sniffed cautiously at the air.

The disadvantages to Aron's mystifying ailment fully outweighed any minor benefits, in the way that an elephant stomping in the jungle can be said to live far more than a mouse under a kitchen sink. For Aron, hell in Jerusalem was a long season that began in mid-March and lasted till end-October. This was when the high temperatures stimulated the city's resident crickets to rub their wings madly and caused the ambient dust and exhaust fumes from all the traffic to grow spirals that rested as a faintly ochre halo above the capital.

He always looked forward to December and January, when the heavy rains ended the reign of dust, shooting down the legions of filth and grime. It had rained the night before and Aron dared to open his lungs to the crisp, almost wintry air.

He put his inhaler away and brought out his yarmulke. He gave a final cough and watched as his son, his head already covered, led the way to the eastern side of the Wailing Wall where the biggest bush grew out from between cracks.

Aron hated wearing a yarmulke even more than he hated crowds. It always seemed to accentuate his allergy, like a circumflex above a letter, as though he were adding a thin layer of dust to his skull. While his father, Józsi, was fiercely Jewish and could quote entire passages of the Tanach with the ease of a trained rabbi, Aron was more *hiloni* than *haredi*, that is an Israeli with little time for the rituals of orthodox Judaism. He succumbed only on rare occasions. That morning, he was wearing a skullcap and had braved the stinking crowds at the gate for his Avi, who had begged to visit the Wailing Wall as a treat for his twelfth birthday.

Aron caught up with his son and placed a hand on his shoulder.

Avi looked up at him and grinned. 'Aren't you pleased we came, Dad?'

He shrugged and mimicked Józsi's pronounced Hungarian accent: 'What's the point of living in Jerusalem if you won't visit the Temple, eh?'

The Wailing Wall is all that remains of the ancient fortification that once surrounded the Temple, which was

destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. This was often called the second Temple to set it apart from Solomon's Temple, the first Holy House, which was built on the same site and destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC.

To superstitious Jews like Józsi and the *haredim*, these two events, separated by more than half a millennium, occurred on exactly the same date in the Jewish calendar: the ninth day of the fifth month — 9 Av, or *Tisha B'Av*.

This was why the first of that month, *Rosh Chodesh Av*, marked the beginning of the lowest point in the Jewish calendar. As a child, Aron remembered how, gathered in the obscurity of his parent's dining room, Józsi would quote the Talmud to proclaim to his wife and son: 'As Av enters, we diminish joy.' And while they would still say *Hallel*, Psalms 113 through 118 — as they did for every new Jewish month — the tone was always more demure, more of a wail than a chant. They would move on to the Book of Lamentations, sitting on the floor and weeping with the Prophet Jeremiah over the lost Temple.

During that period, his parent's gloomy flat in North London became all but a mortuary. The mourning would grow in intensity to culminate in *Tisha B'Av*, 9 Av, when the bans were so stringent that even certain portions of the Torah and Talmud were prohibited on that day.

Back then, Aron had been the dutiful son. *Tisha B'Av* had not yet become the most horrible day of the most horrible month in his calendar.

There was an uninterrupted line of bobbing and covered

heads by the Wall; some of the men also wore prayer shawls and read from scrolls and open books. Behind them were rows of white plastic chairs for those waiting their turn at the Wall or taking a breather from the praying.

Only men and boys were allowed in this main section of the Western Wall. The entire site came under the control of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which had grudgingly allocated a far smaller area to the right for women, split from the main section by a dividing screen.

Standing by the Wailing Wall brought back far too many painful memories, and Aron put his hand in the pocket with the inhaler just for reassurance.

He'd visited the site only once before since making aliyah from London in 1982 — ascending to Israel, which is how the act of return is dubbed in Hebrew.

He had been wearing his yarmulke for two full weeks anyway and, leaving one-year-old Avi with his mother-in-law, he had braved the crowds in order to come to the Wailing Wall as a special tribute to his S'faradi wife. This had been during her *siete*, as he sat a second shiva for her death. It had also been the fortnight during which he was so quick to tears anyway that there was no pretence as his own head moved up and down.

Avi had his mother's thick, curly black hair that seemed to resist the skullcap every time he swayed his head. He also had Sela's healthy olive complexion so that, were it not for the doleful green eyes from Aron's Ashkenazi side, no one would have doubted the boy's S'faradi roots.

This was Avi's birthday — poor, beautiful Avi — celebrating his twelfth birthday without a mother but with a grumpy father who couldn't even breathe like a normal human being.

Avi had found a vacant patch of the Wall a few metres from the screen between a group of black-clad believers, swaying their entire torsos rhythmically, and the male relatives of a boy celebrating his bar mitzvah — who was therefore exactly a year older than Avi. They were all dressed in their finest clothes and even the adults took their cue from the oldest of the party, most probably the grandfather.

Avi closed his eyes and his hand reached out to touch the ancient stones as if to caress and comfort some crestfallen creature. He even started to nod gently back and forth in exactly the way Aron had never taught him.

Aron was standing several paces behind and he turned his attention to the bar mitzvah boy. He could hear him talking and giggling to his female relatives on the other side of the screen. This caused a sharp rebuke from the grandfather. 'Look.' The old man gestured towards Avi. 'Is it his bar mitzvah? Is this the day he becomes a man — ten times better, ten times wiser?'

Thus scolded, the boy turned to a scroll and started bobbing his head with little conviction. Every so often, he threw Avi a look of absolute loathing.

Avi was completely unaware that he was the subject of comparison and while he continued to stroke the slabs of limestone, the other boy tapped forcefully the mother lode for spiritual inspiration.

All along the wall, every conceivable crack in the limestone was filled with folded pieces of paper so that, close up, it looked as if the site had been subjected to an invasion of inconsiderate litterers and a year-long strike by dustmen.

These were actually written prayers to God that were collected twice a year for the Ministry of Religious Affairs by volunteers who carried out full-body ablutions beforehand so that they could reach into every crevice without offending God, their fingers stretching that much closer to the holy of holies. And since all these notes were addressed to God, they were ceremoniously buried nearby in the Mount of Olives.

As he stroked the wall, Avi was careful not to let his fingers slip into the cracks so as not to interfere with other people's wishes and hopes.

The grandfather scolded the bar mitzvah boy again when he saw his fingers in a crack. 'Are your hands clean?' he stated crossly.

Avi took out his own sheet of paper from a pocket, which he unfolded, read a couple of times, nodded, folded again and carefully wedged into a crack.

The other boy had either forgotten his prayer or had not prepared one, and he turned to his grandfather with a look of contrition.

How the grandfather reacted to the boy's lapse was lost on Aron, for just then there was a loud commotion and he instinctively turned his gaze upwards to the top of the Wall where he could see some Arabs looking down at the Jews. He immediately assumed that the shouts were coming from irate Muslims.

What Jews venerate and know as the Temple Mount is equally venerated and known by Muslims as *al-Haram ash-Sharif*, the Noble Sanctuary. Given that the Western Wall forms part of the wall that surrounds al-Aqsa Mosque, there have been many cases of enraged Muslim worshippers hurling rocks down at worshipping Jews, and Jews responding in kind despite their geographical disadvantage. Indeed, Arabs had lost every war against Israel, but they always had the upperhand in the stone-throwing battles of the Temple Mount.

However, the shouts, which were getting progressively louder, were not coming from above.

Aron turned to his right in time to see a rip appear suddenly in the screen.

Two women stepped into the men's section dressed in prayer shawls and carrying scrolls. One of them in particular caught Aron's eye: she seemed to be in her early twenties and her face was so freckled it looked like it had been left to sun-dry for years.

But the newcomers weren't the source of the racket. It was the women they had left behind who were shouting their disapproval, calling them sinful and un-Jewish, urging the two to return to their side of the screen.

The two women ignored the calls and, facing the wall, began to recite to themselves from the scriptures.

In unison, the men stopped bobbing and praying and for a while, most of them seemed capable of doing little more than gawp at this flagrant breach in religious protocol.

Aron was the first to move and instinctively covered the distance to his son in three long strides. The bar mitzvah party, being closest to the intruders, did the opposite, stepping briskly away and thereby offering more wall space to the women.

However, not all the men were slow in their response. On Aron's left, a group in civilian clothes came running out of nowhere to form a tight semicircle around the women, while on his right the large group of *haredim* began to stir. 'What do you think you're doing?' one of them demanded incredulously.

Speaking from behind her male supporters, the woman with the freckled face looked up from the scroll and retorted, 'We have every right to be here. We are as Jewish as you.'

Aron tried to lead his son away, but another group of ultra-orthodox Jews appeared and blocked his path.

'Get out! Get out!' they shouted.

The first *haredi* spat at the woman, 'And just who do you think you are?'

She replied immediately, 'We are Evshel. We stand for justice for Jews. Join us, brother.' She added with a defiant shout, 'The whole of Israel for all Israelis!'

This was clearly a well-rehearsed slogan for it was immediately picked up by the young woman's companions around her, and by various other groups dotted all around the plaza.

There are as many woolly parties in Israel as there are holy days in the Jewish calendar. Aron had heard of Evshel, which he thought consisted of little more than a close-knit

band of loons and goons sequestered in remote settler outposts. He was surprised the party had been able to muster so many activists. The very name, Evshel, was derived from *Esrim v'Shevah Elef*, or 27,000, which represented the total surface area of Biblical Israel and Judea in square kilometres and which the esrimists — as Aron preferred to call them — believed was their God-given inheritance down to the last square millimetre.

'The whole of Israel for all Israelis!' The smaller groups started to band together like ponds adding to a lake, and more women began to cross into the main section. They also chanted: 'The Western Wall must be liberated!'

The ultra-orthodox Jews were so incensed that they came up with their own improvised battle cry: 'Nazis, Christians, whores!'

Aron also hated how crowds could so spontaneously turn into mobs. Holding Avi firmly by the hand, they tried to dash across the plaza to the exit, but found themselves suddenly in the eye of the storm.

Aron stopped and looked around at the sea of faces, all twisted with fury, all yelling menacingly.

There weren't enough soldiers in the plaza to control the situation, and the ones at the gate had been pushed back by a sudden influx of local *haredim* from the Jewish quarter.

Aron and Avi witnessed the first blow: a black-clad believer picked up a chair and swung it squarely into two *evshelim*. One of the them collapsed, blood pouring out of his nose and mouth.

Aron shielded his son as, all around them, the battle erupted, with flying chairs, fists and boots, screams of rage and pain, and the smell of blood and sweat everywhere forming an invisible mist.

He had to think quickly. Of the two armies in this conflict, only one wore a uniform, and the homogenous *haredim* were now lashing out at anyone who was not dressed in black. So Aron turned back towards the Western Wall and to the right in order to cross the Evshel line. His progress was hampered by the fact that he still held Avi firmly to his chest with one arm, using the other arm to block any punches and flying chairs.

He could see his goal: the rip in the screen to the women's section where, he hoped, the battle had not yet spread to and from where they could use the side exit.

But as soon as they were in the midst of the *evshelim*, someone pushed Aron forcefully from the back, causing him to trip along with Avi, and collide into two others. All four fell to the ground in a messy heap, and Avi was briefly on top of the woman with freckles who had provoked this battle.

Her prayer shawl was knocked back to reveal long blond hair in a ponytail and piercing blue eyes. Her fists were clenched and she seemed about to punch Avi.

'Don't you dare touch him,' roared Aron, jumping to his feet and deftly lifting Avi off her.

Still staring at her, Avi mumbled something.

'What did you say?' she said, nonplussed.

Aron was already leading his son away, the path to the screen now clear.

'What did he say to me?' insisted the woman, addressing Aron.

Aron felt like replying, 'You stupid fucking cow', but instead he just shook his head and pulled Avi along.

Avi looked straight into her eyes and repeated his one word. He had to say it loudly to be heard above the din.

'What?' She frowned. It was a strange word to come up with in the middle of all this fighting; the fact that it was in English made it all that much more curious. 'That's right, kid,' she shouted after them, once father and son had reached the rip in the screen. 'This is all a great big carnival.'

Her eyes were brimming with excitement.

Later that morning, the *evshelim* were finally forced out of the plaza by riot police. As they withdrew down the adjoining streets in the Jewish quarter, the *haredim* spat on them from their balconies and pelted them with rubbish and excrement.

It was early afternoon by the time Aron and his son finally returned to their flat at the other end of town. Meanwhile, in the Old City, the *haredim* were still too rattled and needed a release from all that pent-up fury. So they turned their rage on the Muslim quarter, smashing Palestinian cars and attacking passers-by. Bands of Jewish youths sprayed tear gas and threw stones at the police and at Palestinians well into the early evening.

Avi took a deep breath, closed his eyes to make a wish and blew out all twelve candles on a smartly decorated chocolate cake.

'You are S'faradi, dear,' Avi's grandmother said warmly. 'You are 200 per cent your mother's son.' She handed him his birthday presents.

Büyük-anne Lilah demanded only two things of her grandson: that he call her büyük-anne, Turkish for grandmother, and that he consider himself S'faradi like his mother, Sela, rather than Ashkenazi like his father.

'And so your dad is at work,' she said testily, 'when he should be at home for his son's birthday.'

Avi cut two slices of cake. 'They asked him to go in because of what happened this morning.'

Aron was a political commentator and journalist for the conservative daily *Adlai*, and the next edition had had to be changed at the eleventh hour in order to cover the ongoing events at the Wailing Wall.

Büyük-anne Lilah was always perfectly coiffed and manicured and had an all-year-round tan so that, with age, her flabby arms — that a younger Avi had imagined were filled with yoghurt — became blotchy and deeply wrinkled. While she couldn't stop her forearms from spreading, she believed she could limit the droop of her chin by constantly chewing gum. 'Thank you, dear,' she said as he handed her some cake, taking the gum out of her mouth and placing it delicately on the side of the plate. 'Well we shall have your birthday without him.' She nodded at the gift-wrapped presents and added, 'Go on, open them.'

When she moved those arms, the gold bangles at both wrists jingled, which they did now as her fingers moved

through the boy's curly black hair.

'He didn't cough,' Avi said suddenly.

'Hmm?'

'Back at the Wailing Wall, when things got really bad and we were on the ground, Dad was OK.' He added, 'Maybe he's not a patented dustometre.'

Her hand moved away from his head with a dingle. 'What do you mean "on the ground"?' she asked with sudden concern. 'Who pushed you on the ground?'

'Dad,' replied Avi, adding quickly, 'But he was pushed. Everyone was being pushed.'

'Hmm.' She wasn't convinced. 'And anyway, that doesn't excuse his absence.' She shook her head. 'If you'd been a girl, this would have been your bat mitzvah.' She indicated the empty living room with a jingling sweep of the hand, a finger pausing to point at the cake on the coffee table that she'd brought and that was far too big for just the two of them. 'And where are the guests? Where are your friends from school? Why didn't you invite that girl from the building, what's-her-name?'

'Matea,' said Avi sullenly. 'She wouldn't want to come.'

'Oh, don't worry.' She nodded. 'Did I ever tell you that one of my best birthdays was only with my father?'

Büyük-anne Lilah loved to talk about history, her family's history, and usually Avi loved to listen. Like Aron, she was a first-generation Israeli, who had made aliyah from Istanbul in the 1950s to escape from the endless military coups. But unlike Aron, she was proud of her roots. She claimed to be

able to trace her family tree all the way back to 1492, when King Ferdinand expelled her ancestors from Spain.

'Come on, Avi,' she said impatiently. 'Open your presents.'

Avi tore through the wrapping paper of the first of three presents on the table. It was a Megatron transformer, an angular grey robot, which, according to the blurb on the box, was capable of untold destruction thanks to the energy blasts that could be fired from its cannon.

'I'm told that's what all boys your age like these days,' she said happily.

'Thanks, Büyük-anne,' he said unenthusiastically and reached over to kiss her.

He was about to open her second present to him when she indicated the third, which was considerably smaller than the others. 'Open that one,' she said. 'Let's see what your father found for you.'

'That's not from Dad,' said Avi, opening the packet. 'That's from Samiha.' Avi smiled when he saw the latest set of Pogs; Samiha knew how much he loved to collect Pog discs.

Lilah was suddenly very cross. Even their Palestinian housecleaner had been kind enough to buy Avi a gift, but nothing from Aron. 'I'll have a word with your father,' she said under her breath.

'But Dad did take me to the Wailing Wall,' Avi said quickly in his father's defence.

'Yes, where he pushed you to the ground. And if you'd been seriously hurt, what then?'

She was still brooding over her inconsiderate son-in-law when she heard Avi whoop with delight. 'Oh thank you, Büyük-anne.'

Avi had just opened the last present to reveal a framed portrait of an ancient warrior and the boy's mood changed instantly. He gazed at the grainy black-and-white photograph. 'Thank you,' he repeated with a broad grin.

Avi had certainly inherited his mother's fascination with history. Where Aron was a dry journalist who had neither time nor humour for things dead and buried — nor, apparently, for buying a birthday present for his only son — her Sela had been an archaeologist who had specialized in Roman history. In fact, she had been invited to a conference in Rome on her last trip to present a paper on the subtly different Roman architecture of the Levant.

'Tell me about him, Büyük-anne,' pleaded Avi.

'Again?' She feigned impatience.

The boy nodded.

Büyük-anne Lilah was deeply pleased that Avi seemed to be following in her daughter's footsteps and was more than happy to oblige when he had asked her for a print of her grandfather's portrait. The original photograph had remained in Istanbul, so Avi's copy, now cradled in his arms like a baby, was actually a reprint of her copy that graced her living room.

Avi loved to hear about Büyük-anne's grandfather, a decorated Janissary in the Ottoman army, whose grave had been robbed shortly after his burial on account of the full military

dress and gilded sword that had accompanied him.

'Show me where you'll put it,' she said to him, picking the chewing gum off her plate and returning it to her mouth.

With the picture firmly against his chest, Avi led the way to his bedroom. He pointed at the high wall opposite the bed, which was plain white and interrupted only by a framed picture and an old newspaper article.

'I want to put them together,' said Avi simply.

'Oh?' She was surprised to see another picture.

'My great-great-grandfathers,' explained Avi. 'Hungarian and Turk — don't you think that's cool, Büyük-anne?'

The other black-and-white portrait was just as grainy, and both men were in military uniforms and stared with haughty expressions. While the Janissary sported a well-groomed beard, his Western counterpart showed off a perfectly symmetrical and curled moustache like the horns of a water buffalo.

'Who gave you that picture?' she asked.

'My grandparents sent it to me for my birthday,' replied Avi happily. 'I received it yesterday. Isn't it great? Now, I've got both of them.'

Büyük-anne Lilah had never seen the *other* grandparents, Józsi and Dorika, and she didn't think much of them. It was bad enough that they had never met Sela or even their grandson, but it was downright sinful that they hadn't come to Israel to sit shiva with them when Sela died.

'He has the European look of your father,' she said, staring at the Hungarian officer.

Avi wasn't listening. He had already marked a spot on the wall with a pencil for the Janissary and had left the bedroom to get a hammer and a nail.

She turned her attention to the newspaper article and gasped. It was the lead picture in the full-page feature that almost caused her to swallow her gum: a snapshot of four soldiers grinning and drinking beer with six corpses lying haphazardly at their feet. She read the headline: *The Human Face of Evil*.

She waited for her grandson to return to the room.

'Does your father know you've put this horrible thing on your wall?' she demanded crossly.

'It is my father's.' He grinned cheekily. 'He wrote it.'

She returned to frown at the article, chewing so furiously that her second chin flapped. She looked for Aron Lunzer's name and found instead the byline of Arnold Lounger. She recognized the name. Her Sela had fallen in love with Arnold Lounger, who had changed his name to Aron Lunzer by the time they were married.

'This is not appropriate for a boy,' she said finally. 'I will speak to your father.' She would have to make a list of all the things she needed to raise with him. She added, almost as an afterthought, 'Your mother would not want you to go to sleep every night looking at this.'

The article remained tacked to the wall. But that night, curled up in bed, Avi focused only on the portraits of his great-great-grandfathers, flickering in the city lights, side by side and united for the first time.

Avi loved to hear about Büyük-anne's grandfather because he imagined links with his father's own colourful family history. This had been transmitted to him indirectly and in snippets from his paternal grandparents, Nagypapa Józsi and Nagymama Dorika, who insisted on their Hungarian appellations whenever they phoned. He was able to piece these together with the little that Aron had told him to form a hazy picture.

From his grandfather, he discovered that Aron was born in Budapest on 25 October 1956, in the dying days of the Hungarian October Revolution; and that Józsi and Dorika Lunzer moved to London when he was barely more than a week old, forced to seek political asylum in the West. The Lunzers became the Loungers, and Aron became Arnold. However, Józsi hadn't chosen to anglicize their own first names — the promise and hope of a new beginning had applied only to his newborn.

From his father, he learnt that Aron was raised from a dreary life in North London, making aliyah on 3 June 1982 on the eve of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. He followed the IDF into Lebanon, becoming a stringer for *The Daily Telegraph* on the back of his British citizenship as Arnold Lounger, and supplementing his income with freelance commissions to local Israeli publications, including *Adlai*, under the byline of Aron Lunzer. His father had changed his identity and reverted to his original name with which he had first entered Britain as a ten-day-old infant on Dorika's Hungarian passport.

Avi had hung Büyük-anne's Janissary to the right of Nagypapa Józsi's grandfather, the decorated officer in the Austro-Hungarian army who had fought against the Ottomans.

He imagined a meeting between these arch rivals, now related and connected in the blood that coursed through his veins more than a century later. This was how old enemies finally became true brothers. He couldn't help but wonder if, a hundred years from now, a boy would be born with both his blood and that of a Palestinian ancestor.

Avi closed his eyes and imagined he could even meet that future Arab brother and they would talk about how petty the conflict had been and how distant it had all become.

Almost asleep, one word came drifting into his mind. It was the same word that had driven him to beg Aron to take him to the Wailing Wall, and that had been carefully written on a sheet of paper and left in a crack.

'Carnival,' he mumbled drowsily. He hoped God would get that message.

Aron returned home late that night, once the storm had passed and the Old City was enveloped in an uneasy calm. The marauding *haredim* had caused the deaths of two Arabs, including a four-year-old girl. Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade promptly issued a statement to declare that they would avenge the murder of little Salwa.

He stepped in with a cough to clear his throat of any lingering dust from outside. He removed his shoes in the hall, placed them tidily on a rack, used a clothes brush that hung on a nail by the entrance to brush his sleeves and trouser legs, and washed his hands in the guest bathroom before moving on to the rest of the house.

This was the ritual for entering the Lunzer flat, the unwritten rules for residents and visitors alike. This therefore applied particularly to three people: Aron, Avi and the only regular visitor to the flat, Samiha, who let herself in at 8:00 am sharp and out at 5:00 pm, six days a week. Blessed Samiha, who spent all day and every day keeping the flat pure of dust, making this sanctum sanctorum the only place in the world where he didn't have to take short breaths like a wretched animal.

Among the less frequent visitors were the very occasional babysitter, whom he now paid and sent home, and his mother-in-law, Lilah, who visited every Sunday afternoon, after a morning spent playing cards with her group of friends, and on Hanukkah and Avi's birthday. She once let slip that she might have visited more often had Aron been less anal about all that dust nonsense. She was in fact the only visitor to the Lunzer residence who was allowed to dispense with the routine at the door, turning her nose up at the tidy rack of shoes and clothes brush every time she came.

Aron even suspected that Lilah had reshuffled her card-playing session to coincide with the only day in the

week when he worked all day away from home at his regular editorial meetings.

But in terms of extended family, she was his son's only living relative in Israel, so he overlooked her shortcomings for Avi's sake.

He forgave her banal conversations, the steady stream of snide comments, and her irritatingly idealized attachment to the halcyon days of her family in Turkey. If it was so bleeding grand in Istanbul, he always wanted to ask her, why did you make aliyah?

But he was always polite for Avi's benefit, and at all times considerate in memory of Sela. Whenever she phoned, which was how most of their exchanges took place, he would grit his teeth and remind himself that he would have had even more interactions with her had his wife still been alive.

That evening, she had phoned him at work just as he was putting the finishing touches to his column. The production department was waiting to close the commentary page and the subeditor was pinging his monitor every five minutes for his piece like a maddening countdown. With an eye on the clock in the newsroom, Aron answered her call and got an earful of complaints. He carried on working on his piece, mashing the keys until she reached the end of her litany. Then, in rapid succession, he told her that the nature of journalism was such that you sometimes had to work even on your day off, and that obviously he wished the events at the Wailing Wall had occurred a day after Avi's birthday; that the boy had never been in any serious danger; that Avi was

now old enough to have whatever he wanted on his bedroom wall; and that — just for the record — he had already bought his son a birthday present, which, given the hectic day, had been forgotten in a closet.

He said it all very sweetly and proceeded to thank her for spending the afternoon with Avi and wished her an excellent night.

And then he hung up, returned to his monitor and thought of a title for the commentary: *When Extremists Meet Esrimists, Who You Gonna Call?*

He went over his piece one last time and pressed the send button, thereby dispatching it to the sub's desktop and causing several monitors in production to ping simultaneously.

The political spectrum in other Western democracies was visible in clear, discrete bands, and to foreign observers, the events at the Wailing Wall would seem little more than an altercation between two equally batty fringes of the far right, a battle of the ultras. But in Israel, the colours were more blurred and the rainbow of politics was more like a set with progressively dimmer secondary, tertiary and even quaternary arcs that were so faint that most people didn't even see them in normal daylight.

Aron's piece argued that the events of that day were momentous for several reasons. For a start, it was an undeniably spectacular show of strength by ultranationalist Evshel, the party that until recently had been so minor in Israeli politics that it would have had trouble filling a shed with activists let alone the largest plaza in Jerusalem. The battle had in fact

been more about flexing these newfound muscles than about pushing for gender equality at the holy site. They had turned up in their hundreds — which with hindsight explained the unexpected crowd at the entrance — and had wilfully provoked the far more established ultra-religious party on its home turf. The *haredim* had then turned on Palestinians both out of deep frustration and as a subtle if violent reminder to the Israeli public that they would forever stand for true Zion.

The piece also touched on the spectre of more running battles between the scary fringes, especially if mainstream politics slipped from the current centre or centre-right — *Adlai*'s main readership. At that point, even the defenders of the modern state — the heroic ghostbusters of Israel — would have their hands too full of psychoreactive slime to answer the phone.

Aron had strapped on this last bit to his column after Lilah's call.

He went straight to the closet where he'd hidden Avi's birthday present. The large gift-wrapped box contained an ornate Mahogany chess set, which he'd bought several months earlier on his last trip to the UK. He'd kept it hidden all this time precisely so as to spring this fabulous chess set on Avi for his big day and, according to the original plan, straight after an uneventful trip to the Wailing Wall by way of a Häagen-Dazs treat. But he'd got the call from *Adlai* when they were still in the Jewish quarter, having only just emerged from the side exit of the plaza, and he kicked himself now for having forgotten both the gift and the ice cream.

Avi loved chess as much as he loved history. Aron had bought this particular set not only because it was the most attractive in the shop, but especially because the chess pieces were faithful replicas of the Isle of Lewis chessmen: the squat Viking pieces that were discovered in Scotland, each with a distinctive face, complete with the wild-eyed berserkers biting their shields with battle fury. He really wished he hadn't forgotten, as the gift would have had that much more of an impact if he'd given it straight after their run-in with the crazies at the Wailing Wall.

He carried the chess set, entered Avi's bedroom and placed it gently on the floor by the bed so that it would be the first thing the boy woke up to.

For a while, he just stared at his sleeping Avi.

In the dark and with his green eyes shut, he looked just like Sela.

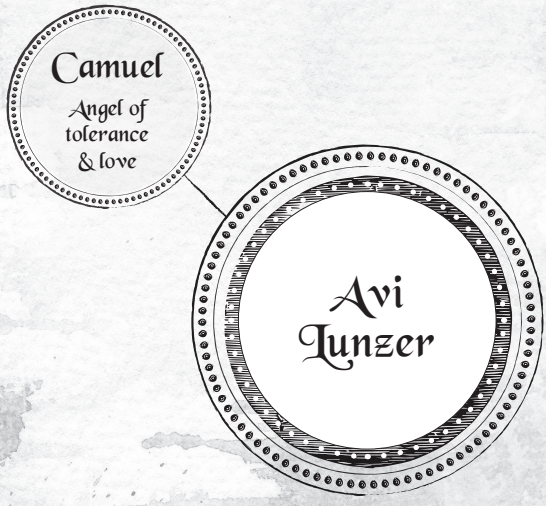
He blinked as he remembered how he had held him in the plaza and how, out of nowhere, he had been scared witless for his son. He had lied to Lilah; the danger had been very real. When the *evsheli* cow had clenched her fists and seemed about to strike Avi, Aron had been ready to pounce. He could have killed her. He would have buried his boot in her face. He could have scratched her, bitten her with bestial instinct.

It was such an extreme gut reaction that it troubled him to think about it even now. In this one conflicting moment of fear and rage, nothing else had mattered, not even his allergy.

He focused again on his sleeping boy and, not for the first time, he asked his dead wife how he could be doing a better job as a parent.

Then, ever so softly, he whispered the Hungarian lullaby that his mother used to sing to him and slipped out of the room:

'*Csoda fia szarvas, ezer ága boga —' Boy stag of wonder, with horns of a thousand branches —*


Camuel
Angel of
tolerance
& love
Avi
Lunzer

2

Sometimes, Avi wished he'd been born in another family and raised in a different house — in Matea's family and home, to be exact. Matea, who was also twelve years old and had celebrated her bat mitzvah a few months earlier, lived in the same apartment block, both flats facing east, hers on the first floor and his on the loftier third of a four-storey building. Their kitchen balconies were connected by a hotline — as Avi had called it when he'd finished rigging it up — which was meant to allow them to communicate through polystyrene cups and a hanging wire. Unfortunately, much as they strained to hear, pressing cups to ears, not even the thinnest garbled voice came through.

'Are you sure you can't hear me now?' Avi yelled down the wire.

'No,' Matea shouted back, leaning dangerously over the railing.

So that while it was always easier to holler their communication between balconies, to the annoyance of Mrs Spiegel on the second floor who lived in her kitchen, they kept the line upon Avi's insistence. It provided him with a sense of physical attachment to Matea's home, even if it was hanging by a thread.

But it wasn't Matea herself that he was drawn to, or any particular member of her family. Rather, it was the complete bundle that she represented: her three siblings, two parents and, over the holidays, four grandparents and a wholesale number of uncles, aunts and cousins all packed into a real house.

Structurally, their flats were identical, with an equal number of walls enclosing four bedrooms, a large living room, dining room and kitchen. But they were identical in the way of twins who are separated at birth and raised in, respectively, happy and melancholic settings. Matea's house was vibrant with endless mess in every corner, walls stained by years of grimy kiddy handprints, and excited voices filling up every room so that, at any one time, you could listen to four conversations simultaneously.

Avi's fondest memory ever was of a Hanukkah holiday when Aron was compelled to travel to the UK for work and when Matea's family insisted that he should stay with them, adopting him for two days and a night. For all too brief a time, Avi was one of theirs, receiving gifts even from the grandparents, uncles and aunts and, at night in the bedroom allocated to the boys, participating in a farting contest with Matea's brothers and cousins.

By stark contrast, Avi and Aron lived in a mausoleum. They were the only occupants of the flat, and since the third bedroom was Aron's study and the fourth was the TV room, they rarely used the large living room and adjoining dining room, which had long ago been converted into a bar. Despite a spectacular view of Jerusalem from the third floor, the heavy green drapes were usually drawn in those two rooms so that that they appeared to drift in and out of them, submerged in the constant half-light of a Gothic set.

Indeed, where it was always Hanukkah at Matea's, it was forever *Rosh Chodesh Av* or *Yom Kippur* at the Lunzers — the pumped up gloom of heavyweight festivals.

As a younger child, Avi had dreaded all the ghoulish things that could appear from those rooms. In the near-constant obscurity, the bar was a wooden beast that spanned a full four metres from scaly head to flaking tail, complete with its brood of seven matching stools. Even now, he only dared to enter when Samiha was in there and with the curtains drawn back. In a brighter light, the ghosts appeared less malevolent; they sat at their stools, sipped cocktails and filled the area with spirited chatter.

Sela had ordered the bar to provide a focal point to soirees with friends. But the truth was that their friends were actually her friends. When she died, so too did the dinner parties. Having long outgrown its use, the bar now looked set to await the Messiah with Semitic stoicism.

Also barely visible in the constant twilight was a large mirror covered in the flag of Israel, the Star of David, which

hung on the wall behind the bar. Over the years, the flag itself had become a shroud dissolved into its shadowy environment to the extent that the bright blue had turned greenish grey and the yellowing white had splotches of darker patches of grime to delineate continents of an alien atlas.

For a younger Avi, the mirror and bar worked their black magic hand in hand. The bar had been a very real sleeping beast that could feed off the enchanted mirror and that would awaken to consume everything in its path if anyone was foolish enough to remove the protective shroud. Or that the mirror was so potently wicked that, uncovered, it could suck in and forever trap your brain, leaving a husk of a body.

Only once, with Samiha busy at the other end of the room, did Avi summon up the courage to touch the cloth and feel tentatively the wrought iron frame that it concealed.

According to the unwritten rules of the Lunzer residence, it was the only object in the flat that could never be cleaned. In that, it was at odds with the rest of the house with its pervasive smell of disinfectant, and its polished surfaces and bleached sheets. While those house rules and the endless war against dirt and dust were aimed at creating a more hospitable environment for Aron, they also created an increasingly stifling one for Avi.

Avi removed his shoes and brushed himself down. 'You don't have to use this,' he said to Matea, indicating the brush. 'Just take your shoes off.'

They went to his bedroom and Matea immediately made for the shelf with his comprehensive collection of Tom and Jerry comic books.

'I wish I had this many,' she marvelled. She chose one and jumped on his bed.

Ordinarily, they would be in her house, jostling for space with her two brothers and sister, and talking loudly in order to be heard above the interference from other voices. Here, even a whisper sounded like an awkward shout.

But Avi wanted to write his word on the wall, just below the great-great grandfathers, and he wanted Matea to write it because she had lovely handwriting.

Avi also had an ulterior motive in inviting her to his house. For a full week now, he'd fantasized about her and about this very moment. The fantasy was short and not at all as developed as some of his favourite daydreams like, for instance, the one where he was a young Briton who was abducted by a band of marauding Vikings and ended up befriending the son of the chief or, as a variation, a Crusader squire who was taken by the young and charismatic son of Saladin.

He joined her on the bed. Their legs were now touching and with the comic book across their laps, Avi waited for her to reach the end of the page before saying, 'Do you want to help me write on the wall?'

She shook her head, causing her ponytail to wag. 'Not yet.'

Just then, Samiha entered with two glasses of juice and two slices of his birthday cake. She placed the tray on Avi's

desk and, in her broken Hebrew, told them not to enter the kitchen as she was washing the floor.

Glaring at the chocolate cake, Matea waited for the housecleaner to leave before she uttered, 'Who does she think she is? Your mother?'

'She's OK,' he said dismissively. Samiha had been a full-time housecleaner at the Lunzers for thirteen years; to Avi, she had always been a lot more than a cleaner, as integral to his universe as the house itself and everything within it.

'She's Arab.'

He shrugged.

'Aren't you scared,' continued Matea, 'that she's going to steal something or do something?'

'Of course not. Why should she?'

'Because she's Arab,' groaned Matea as though it was the most obviously dim question anyone could ever ask. 'They're all like that. Everyone knows that.'

He didn't feel like sticking up for Samiha and he looked over guiltily at his new Pogs on the floor next to his cool new chess set. He tried to change the subject. 'Do you want to play chess?' he asked, picking up a chessman. 'You'll love their faces — they all look horrible.'

She looked away from the chess piece and indicated the juice and cake. 'I'm not having any of it,' she said sullenly. 'So anyway, what do you want to write on the wall?'

He told her.

'What?'

He repeated: 'Carnival.'

She said with derision, 'But that's so boring.'

'I've got lots of different colours,' he said quickly, 'and we can make the letters as big as you want.'

'But why?'

He hesitated. 'It's a secret code,' he said finally. 'It's funny.' He'd known Matea all his life, but only in the last week had he thought about kissing her.

'It's not funny. It's just weird.' She pouted as her stare returned to the chocolate cake. 'But I'll do it,' she said, perking up suddenly, and adding sweetly, 'if you get your dad to fire her.'

He looked at Matea and frowned.

She returned his look and added earnestly, '*You* know more than anyone how bad *they* are.'

He knew what she was referring to, but asked anyway, 'Why me?'

Matea groaned, 'Because *they* killed your mum.'

Everyone in the neighbourhood knew about Sela Lunzer, the innocent victim of a terrorist attack who was shot by Palestinian gunmen in Rome. Avi had been one month away from his first birthday when Sela travelled to Italy on business, and four days shy of it when she returned to Israel, her coffin draped in the Star of David. She and the fifteen other civilians had been offered full military honours as fallen heroes of Israel. Just about everyone in the neighbourhood had turned up for the funeral, many even choosing to sit shiva with Aron.

'Can I see it?' Matea asked suddenly.

'Wh-what?' Avi was confused. He was still trying to understand why she'd think Samiha was related to his mother's murderers.

'You know,' said Matea, smiling sweetly. 'The flag.'

'Oh.'

'Can I?'

'I guess.'

He led the way to the bar and pointed at the wall.

Matea gasped. Even in the poor light she could see that the years had not been kind to the flag. 'But it's a martyr's flag,' she exclaimed, adding disappointedly, 'My mum told me it was special.' She drew closer to it. 'You should keep it in a drawer or something. That's what your mum would want.'

Matea touched the fabric reverently and felt the iron frame underneath. 'What's that?' she asked.

'A mirror,' Avi replied simply. He was feeling uneasy and wanted them to return to his bedroom.

'Why is it covered?'

'For my mum. Don't touch it.'

Matea groaned again. 'Don't you know anything?' She chuckled. 'You're supposed to cover mirrors only for seven days — for shiva — not for a million years.'

The flag was tacked to the back of the mirror at the four corners so Matea pulled the mirror back on its hook in order to reach one of the staples.

Avi was shocked. 'What are you doing?'

'Have you ever seen it?'

Avi shook his head. The mirror had always remained covered.

'Aren't you curious?' Matea was now driven by two purposes — to liberate the flag and to see the mirror. She had succeeded in prizing a staple back with her nails and was now attempting to pull it off.

Avi could have physically stopped her. But part of him was curious, a small part of him did want to see the mirror for the first time. 'But what if something bad happens,' he said weakly, his words betraying his thoughts.

The staple proved too resilient so she was forced to pull the mirror back further to straighten the wire and free the corner.

The sudden image of his father discovering the exposed mirror and yelling filled Avi with panic. 'Stop,' he said, this time urgently and tugging at her arm.

'Don't be such a baby.' She brushed his hand away and peeled the corner back.

It was just as a sliver of the mirror appeared at the bottom corner that Avi blurted out: 'If you stop now I'll kiss you on the mouth.'

That got Matea's attention.

With Avi's hand back on her arm, she recoiled from him so suddenly that the mirror followed her, shifting off its hook. For an instant, it appeared frozen in midair, the freed corner of the flag preparing to flap.

In that instant, it seemed that the young girl would be able to hold up the wrought iron frame. When it fell, it did so almost gracefully, as if it had always been destined to

end in a loud explosion and a thousand shards.

Matea screamed. Samiha came running and the girl screamed even louder.

Even though a small piece of the mirror, no larger than a coin, had bounced up and had done little more than graze her leg, she shrieked as if a piece of shrapnel had gone right through her.

Samiha was the epitome of calm. She ordered the children to step away from the glass and she would have cleaned the girl's superficial wound, but Matea would have none of that. Sobbing uncontrollably, she limped to the door and down the two flights of stairs to her house, leaving her shoes behind.

Avi was completely unhurt. The fact that most of the flag had still been fastened to the mirror had limited the spread of the broken glass.

'Poor Abi,' tutted Samiha.

Avi was now on the other side of the bar, standing by the stools and transfixed by the section of the wall where the mirror had been. 'You mean, poor Dad. He's the one who liked it.' Avi added anxiously, 'He's going to kill me.'

'He like it,' agreed Samiha in Hebrew as she checked him for pieces of glass. 'But poor Abi.' She sent the boy to his room and went about cleaning the mess and praying that the jinn that had been trapped in the mirror would not plague the two children with bad luck.

In the event, Aron did not kill his son and didn't even punish him — not at first. He told him off about being careless,

especially since the neighbour's child had been injured, but was otherwise philosophical about the incident. 'Man thrives on accidents,' he told his son. 'Just try to make it the right kind of accident next time.'

It was as if Aron had waited all those years for someone else to remove the mirror and the last stronghold of dust in the flat. He instructed Samiha to wash the flag and thought no more about the event until the following day.

Avi was at the bedroom wall with a pencil, dragging his hand along an arc under the great-great grandfathers so that the word would appear like a banner. He was trying to write in as ornate and large a script as possible. He stopped every so often to rub out a stroke or to correct a wavy line or add a flamboyant loop.

Aron watched his son in silence for a while, indulgently allowing the mess on the bedroom wall to grow. Then he turned his attention to the last piece he wrote for *The Daily Telegraph* as Arnold Lounger and for which he had received the most acclaim as a freelancer.

'Your grandmother phoned me about this,' he said. 'She feels it might be giving you nightmares.' The full-page feature was a scoop on a Christian Lebanese militiaman who had participated in the massacre of Palestinians in the Sabra refugee camp. 'She thinks you should take it down.'

'But I like it, Dad. I think it's the best thing you've ever written.'

He chuckled. He wasn't sure it was his best ever, but it had certainly been instrumental in convincing the publishers

of *Adlai* of his investigative skills and, more importantly, of his affiliations. By the time the IDF prepared to lift its siege of West Beirut in March 1983, Aron had accepted their offer of full-time correspondent, and Sela had agreed to marry him. 'Not too scary for bedtime?'

'Dad,' Avi groaned. 'I'm not a baby.'

Aron spotted a more recent article: an op-ed he'd written for *Adlai* under his Israeli name. It had been tacked to the wall furthest from the Janissary ancestor since Lilah's last visit. He read an excerpt: 'Just imagine that you are born with a penchant for cheddar cheese. Would you go to a French supermarket and choose the one, comparatively inferior cheddar among the 200 different cheeses on offer? Or would you go to an American supermarket where the choice is largely limited to the 200 varieties of cheddar? Your tastes are an active function of your makeup. If you are aware of and true to your tastes, the choice becomes academic. Similarly, there is little more than intellectual curiosity in comparing the different mutational paths of dinosaurs and humans, or of the widely varying narratives of Palestinians and Israelis...'

He stopped reading; it was one of his earliest commentaries and far from his best.

Aron believed that excellence could only be achieved through confrontation and a predisposed kind of choice. But he had explored that notion of choice in other, less cheesy op-eds. 'I do think you should take this down,' he said. 'I'll print out a different piece for you. How about

a recent one about what happened the other day at the Wailing Wall?'

Avi shook his head. 'I like the cheese.' He took a step back from the wall and then, like an artist examining his oeuvre, he indicated the central portraits as he explained, 'You see, they're having a conversation.'

It was only upon closer inspection that Aron could make out the pencil marks around both articles. Each was set within bubbles pointing towards the respective great-great grandparent such that it seemed as if the Janissary was expounding on the human face of evil, while his Hungarian counterpart retaliated with a discourse on cheddar.

Now that Avi had stepped back from the wall, Aron could read the bold letters that he'd written in an arc:

CARNIVAL

Avi saw him reading the banner under the portraits, which had become a caption to a wall-sized cartoon. 'Matea thought it was weird,' he said glumly.

'I see,' said Aron. It was certainly an unusual word to deface a wall with. He wondered whether Avi would be drawing clowns next or a couple of floats. 'Why a carnival?'

Avi shook his head vigorously. 'It's not *a* carnival — it's just *carnival*.' He went back to the wall to put some finishing touches with the pencil before turning to his colouring pens.

Aron frowned as he remembered that his son had used that word on the *evsheli* cow at the Western Wall.

He suddenly felt guilty that he hadn't considered how traumatic the whole experience must have been for a twelve-year-old. 'Avi, you know that people do bad things,' he began lamely. He glanced at the picture of the Butcher of Sabra. 'Very bad things.' He began to suspect that maybe Lilah had been right about its negative effect on Avi. 'You do know that what happened the other day at the Temple Mount was bad, really wrong.'

Avi turned to look at him and with a twinkle in his eye, he said 'really' in Hebrew, '*Mamash*.'

'I'm being serious, Avi.'

'So am I, Dad.'

'It wasn't a carnival.'

'Just carnival,' he corrected again.

'For God's sake,' Aron said impatiently, 'it wasn't fun. It wasn't exciting. It was just a bunch of crackpots going at each other. You do know that, don't you?'

Avi nodded. '*Mamash*,' he repeated. Aron was about to get cross with him, so he added quickly, 'I learnt that word at in the Chabad.' He fell silent and went back to colouring his letters.

At the beginning of term, Avi's class had spent a couple of nights in a Chabad, a spiritual retreat for adults and children, by Lake Merom in Galilee. The boy had returned so exhilarated and had spoken so enthusiastically about his experience that Aron had almost been tempted to see it for himself. But the whole Chabad setup reminded him too much of the rituals of orthodox Judaism and of his parent's

flat in North London, especially Józsi's three cardinal rules that were 'as easy as A-B-D': the Hebrew *'ahavat Torah*, love for the Torah; the Yiddish *bentch*, give blessing after a meal; and *daven*, pray with emotion. It was especially the *davening* that Aron hated.

Avi hadn't explained anything and Aron grew tired of waiting. 'So?' he prompted.

'We learnt about Rabbi Schneur Zalman,' said Avi, reaching for a different colouring pencil. 'He added one word in the book of Job and changed the whole meaning.' He paused and glanced at Aron. 'Isn't that amazing, Dad?' he said with a contagious smile. 'He changed the world with one word. Before that, people didn't get that they were part of God — I mean really part of Him. But after he added that word, people started to understand that their souls weren't just *like* God — they *really* were divine.'

'And what was the word?'

For the first time in his life, Avi looked at his dad as though he were being slow-witted. '*Really*.'

'Really?'

'Yes, really.'

Aron couldn't help it; he started to laugh. 'God, sometimes you sound just like my dad. Really.'

But Avi wasn't laughing. He was pointing at his two great-great grandfathers. 'They were stupid because they fought when they could have been friends. And they fought because they believed such hateful things about each other. We're just like them.'

Avi was going to change the world with his word. And he thought he sounded very grownup when he added, 'This is my wailing wall — look, there's even a crack in it.'

The following day Büyük-anne Lilah almost wailed when she saw the broken mirror. 'How could you do that?' she moaned to Avi, her deeply freckled hands moving to her cheeks in shock.

'I didn't, Büyük-anne. It was Matea.'

She remained silent for a while, taking in the metal frame with its ornate lattice pattern, now fully uncovered and empty of magic, leaning disenchanted against a chair in the hall. The flag itself had to be washed twice, hand-scrubbed by Samiha to remove eleven years of grime, and was ironed and stored away in the cupboard in the TV room where all the useless junk ended up.

'How could you,' she repeated sadly. 'It was my wedding gift to your parents.'

The gold bangles at both wrists jingled as she caressed the iron frame. 'My father bought it for my mother,' she said sadly. 'And look how it is because she gave it to me and I gave it to your mother.'

'It just needs a new mirror. That's all,' said Avi.

She shook her head. 'And how do you replace a mirror that was made in the nineteenth century in Limoges?'

'Well it was always covered up anyway,' he pouted.

The hand on the frame moved back to close into a tight fist. 'Yes.' She felt that the boy's father should have returned

the gift after her Sela died, rather than leave it to fester. 'Yes, yes.' She moved away abruptly with a tinkle. 'Tell Samiha I'll have coffee in the living room,' adding, 'and do open the curtains, will you dear? What's the point of living on a third floor if you won't let the view in?'

She told him that she hoped he would take more care of the Janissary and asked whether he had taken down that 'horrible article' in his room. Then she launched into her family's history, recounting anecdotes of the pioneers who had fled Spain in the fifteenth century.

Büyük-anne Lilah ended her account abruptly as soon as she heard Aron's cough, which preceded the sound of the key in the door. He spluttered as he entered the flat, closing the door on the dust and the traffic outside.

'Hi, Dad,' called Avi from the living room.

'Hmm,' came the response.

Büyük-anne Lilah waited patiently for her son-in-law to finish his ablutions. She got up to leave when he came into the room, raising her eyebrows ever so slightly at his socks. 'Hello, Aron.'

'Lilah.' Aron forced a smile and said a bit too affably, 'Did you win today?'

Büyük-anne and her friends played for money, with a pot that never exceeded a few shekels just to make it interesting. Her bangles clinked as she gave a noncommittal wave. 'And how was your meeting?' she asked politely.

'As usual.'

'Well then.' She kissed Avi and aimed for the hall. 'I'll

see you next week, dear,' adding pointedly, 'and you'd better close the curtain now. You wouldn't want to be in trouble now.'

'He's already in trouble,' said Aron.

'What, for that old thing?' Büyük-anne indicated the deB jected frame. 'Give it to me and I'll find the perfect mirror for it.'

'Then take it,' said Aron. 'It's yours, Lilah.'

She smiled, delighted, and told him her handyman would pick it up tomorrow. 'Sela will be pleased.'

Aron waited for her to leave before turning to his son. 'It's not about the mirror,' he said, his green eyes turning grey. 'I saw Matea's mum in the stairwell. Is there anything you want to tell me?'

Avi shook his head.

Aron shouted when he was very cross. But when he was furious, his tone turned icy cold. 'So you're depraved now? Is that it?'

'No, Dad.' Avi was confused. Try as he might, he couldn't stop his tears from welling up in his eyes.

'And why did you lie to me about how it broke?' he demanded.

'I didn't, Dad, I swear.'

'You will go to your room,' ordered Aron, 'and you will write 200 words on what happened and about how sorry you are. And then, you will go downstairs and hand that essay to Matea's mum. Do I make myself clear?'

Avi was forced to nod as he wept.

In Matea's retelling of the events, Avi had whipped out his penis and had wanted her to show him her privates. When she refused, Avi pushed her against the mirror, which somehow caused it to fall off its hook.

Avi cried because his father hadn't even wanted to hear his side of the story. Matea was a filthy liar. He'd never shown her his penis and didn't want to see her naked — he'd just wanted to kiss her. When he wrote that, Aron duly corrected it in red ink, and sent him back to write progressively different accounts, which, with every version, was more toned with her tale and more replete with contrition.

When, finally, a suitable apology had been handwritten on a clean sheet of paper, Avi went downstairs, rang the doorbell, handed his essay to Matea's mum and mumbled: 'This is to say I'm sorry.'

She nodded. 'And I'm really sad,' she said at the door as she took the sheets of paper. 'You were like a brother to Matea.' She stared first at the sheet and then at him as though waiting for him to apologize once more for good measure. 'You know, Avi, you were lucky you didn't hurt her. That broken glass could have cut her very seriously. And we — ' Her voice trailed off.

Behind her, Avi could hear the voluble noises of the house and he yearned to enter.

'Thank you for this,' she said at length, waving the sheets. 'And send my best regards to your father.' Ever so slowly, she closed the door in his face.

Avi turned bright red and ran back to his house and his bedroom where he counted the ways he hated Matea and prayed she'd live to regret her lies. He was so furious with her that he even came close to cutting the hotline linking their two kitchen balconies.

But he missed her house.

And with every passing day after that, he would linger progressively longer at their door on his way out or back, hoping someone would open it and that all would be forgiven to return to how it was before the accident. On one occasion, he arrived from school at the same time as Matea's older brother and they climbed the stairs together in complete silence.

When Avi hesitated at their door, the older boy asked him, 'What do you want?'

'Can I see Matea?'

'Which part of her?' The boy found his joke so funny that Avi could still hear his laughter as he entered and shut the door.

It was a full three weeks later before Avi saw Matea again. She was waiting in the lobby.

'Hi,' said Avi.

'Hi,' she replied, looking away at the main entrance.

'What're you doing?'

'Waiting for my dad.'

'You want to play a game?'

She just shook her head without looking at him, causing her ponytail to swing.

There was an awkward silence.

At first, he'd meant to confront her with her lie, to ask her why she'd said those horrible things and to seek an apology from her. But that wouldn't have made things right between them. Avi could think of only one way to make her like him again: by lying himself. 'I told my dad to fire our cleaner.'

Matea spun around to face him. 'Really?'

'Yeah.'

She smiled. 'What did he say?'

'He said he'd consider it.'

She wanted more and urged him with her eyebrows. Avi had already fabricated a tall tale, so he had to wrap it up and sell it.

'He said that in any case he was thinking of getting a new cleaner because she's too big to do housework.'

'You mean she's too fat.' She had a broad grin.

Avi nodded, adding under his breath, 'And too Arab.'

Just then, Matea's father pulled up at the main entrance and honked his horn.

'My dad's here,' she said, turning to the door. 'He's dropping me off at the mall.'

'Can I come?'

'No, I'm meeting my girlfriends.' She hesitated at the door and, turning to Avi, added sweetly, 'But after that, maybe I'll come to your house.'

But he just wanted to go to hers. 'Or we could go to your house.'

She shook her head. 'Yours,' she insisted coyly. 'That way I can write that word on the wall for you. Or maybe you'll want to show me whatever you want.'

Avi watched her skip to her father's car, her ponytail bobbing up and down.

Samiha was mopping the guest bathroom when Avi rushed in. 'Wait, Abi,' she said, indicating his feet on the wet floor.

He looked down at his socks then frowned at her. 'You're always telling me what to do,' he said, almost shouting. 'You're not my mother. And my dad always wants us to wash our hands when we come in.' He moved resolutely to the sink, leaving his footprints on the floor.

She looked at him with surprise. '*Allah*,' she breathed.

Avi waited for Matea anxiously all afternoon.

He was actually pleased when she didn't come before 5:00 pm, which was when Samiha left the flat. He brushed his teeth, forced a comb through his unruly hair and applied some of Aron's deodorant. He even kept checking himself in the mirror of the main bathroom.

At 5:15, he started to suspect that she had stood him up.

Matea was just a liar and he began to dislike her again.

With every passing minute, he also felt increasingly guilty that he had lied about Samiha just so that Matea would like him again. How could he even have talked about firing her, he thought ashamedly, when she kept their house together.

'Carnival,' he muttered to himself.

The shame was in every person and in every situation.

The word in English, which Avi believed could transform the world, had its roots in Hungarian and Hebrew.

Those distant grandparents spoke with a Hungarian-Hebrew stress that had always delighted the boy. It was like a secret code invented by them and shared with a grandson they had never met. Thus, *jó* and *tov*, which meant 'good' in Hungarian and Hebrew, respectively, became *jó-tov* for 'excellent' and *nem-lo*, or 'no-no', was 'never ever'.

But *de kar haval*, 'pity-pity', denoted the ultimate in shame and pain and was used sparingly and only to represent a sense of outrage. It applied to Aron's grandfather and other relatives who were murdered in the Holocaust; to Józsi's younger brother and after whom Aron had initially been named, who perished in Budapest during the October Revolution; and it applied to Aron's mysterious ailment because he had popped out coughing instead of crying, like a newborn being thrust into the wrong atmosphere. But then, according to Dorika, it was precisely that sinfully alien environment at Aron's time and date of birth that literally seized his throat and caused that first of a lifetime of coughing fits.

Avi had rendered Nagymama Dorika's *de kar haval* into the more manageable 'carnival', and he had broadened the meaning to cover all injustices, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and the death of his mother.

But it was far more than that, and Avi sat at his desk

and reached for a pen and paper to write down his definition of carnival.

Carnival is about knowing — really *knowing — the shameful things you do and understanding that you can only stop doing them if you recognize they're wrong in the first place.*

He read what he'd just written. That didn't sound right at all. He knew what carnival meant, and he knew that God would understand what he meant by it when the note from the Wailing Wall would be delivered. But he had trouble describing it in words. It was a bit like *mamash*. The Chabad leader had explained how it meant so much more than 'really', more than 'literally' or 'tangibly' — *mamash* was all of those and still meant something more. His carnival was a bit like that.

He tried again:

Carnival is about being aware — really aware — of the shame that makes people what they are, so that they can become more understanding of others.

That was marginally better.

Matea was still a filthy liar, but then so was everyone else. He just had to tell her 'carnival', actually say it to her face for the Jewish magic to work. Then she would realize, with blinding clarity, how wrong she was about Arabs and become a happier person for it.

He scrubbed out the previous definitions and wrote:

Carnival: To recognize shame really.

He nodded and then looked up when he heard wails of anguish in the stairwell.

At 5:45, Aron entered his bedroom with a pale expression.

Even without Matea, Avi was invited back to her house the following morning and for the last time. After that, even the hotline had to be cut.

Neatly folded in his suit pocket was the spell to change the world and Matea's life. It was considerably shorter than 200 words and he didn't intend to give to anyone. This time, Aron came down the stairs with him.

Samiha immediately dropped her broom when they left and headed for Avi's bedroom. Finding her spot next to the desk, she prostrated herself a short distance from the wall. It wasn't the right time for prayer but Samiha made the most of the fact that she was alone in the flat. She was in the boy's bedroom because, of all the rooms, this was marginally the closest to the Kaaba in Mecca. She raised her hands to her shoulders, fingers stretching to the earlobes. Then, with the first *Allahu Akbar* completed, she folded her hands over her stomach with the right hand covering the left hand to restrict every movement. Her eyes fixed the exact spot on the floor where her forehead rested during prostration. At a length of three forearms,

in the direction of the Kaaba, the wall with the Hungarian and Turk acted as her sutra, the compulsory barrier between a worshipper and the rest of the world.

Aron wore a yarmulke only when he had to and usually in order to add gravitas to momentous events, such as 13 March 1983, the day he married Sela; 1 January 1985, the day Avi was born; and 27 December 1985, the day his Sela died along with fifteen others during simultaneous twin terrorist attacks at Rome and Vienna airports by the Abu Nidal organization.

That morning, he was in a yarmulke for Matea.

Samiha prayed: 'God set me apart from my sins as east and west are apart from each other.' She paused and noted with concern that her eyes had strayed. She forced them back to the exact spot on the floor and emptied her mind of common thoughts, including and especially thoughts about that poor little girl and the evil jinn who had killed her.

The door to the flat was already open as father and son stepped inside. Even though every room was packed with people, there was a creepy silence as if the house itself had ascended to the third floor and lost the will to reflect the voices.

A tight band had formed around Matea's mum, propping her up, whose face had frozen into a crescent-shaped groan.

Matea never returned from the shopping mall. She died there along with twenty-three others in a suicide attack by al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade to avenge the death of little Salwa.

The three mirrors in Matea's living room and dining room were covered in black shrouds because everyone

was created in God's image, and since each death diminished that image, covering mirrors could adequately reflect the loss.

God is the greatest.

With this final *Allahu Akbar* completed, Samiha prepared to leave Avi's bedroom.

She paused only briefly to take in the latest additions to the wall.

The image, closest to the Hungarian ancestor, was of a devastated shopping mall with a focus on a paramedic, squatting helplessly and his head buried in his hands. Below that image was a short poem Avi had written for Matea along with her passport picture.