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HEALTHY START

Every night, ever since she'd left him, he'd fall asleep in a different spot: on the sofa, in an armchair in the living room, on the mat on the balcony like some homeless bum. And every morning, he made a point of going out for breakfast. Even prisoners get a daily walk in the yard, don't they? At the café they always gave him a table set for two, and sat him across from an empty chair. Always. Even when the waiter specifically asked if he was alone. Other people would sit there in twos or threes, laughing, tasting each other's food, fighting over the check, while Miron sat by himself eating his Healthy Start—orange juice, muesli with honey, decaf double espresso with warm low-fat milk on the side. Of course it would have been nicer if someone had been sitting across the table from him and laughing with him, if there had been someone to argue with over the check as he struggled to pay, handing over the money to the waitress, saying, "Don't take it from him! Avri, put it back. This one's on me." But he didn't really have anyone to do that with, and breakfast alone in a café was a hundred times better than staying at home.

Miron spent a lot of time eyeing the other tables. He'd eavesdrop on conversations, read the sports supplement, or

examine the ups and downs of the Israeli shares on Wall Street with an air of detached concern. Sometimes someone would come over and ask for a section of the paper he'd finished reading, and he would nod and try to smile. Once, when a sexy young mother with a baby in a stroller walked over to him, he even said to her, as he gave up the front page with the banner headline about a gang rape in the suburbs: "What a crazy world we're bringing our children into." He thought it sounded like the kind of statement that brings people closer together, pointing as it did to their common fate, but the sexy mom just glared at him and took the Healthy Living supplement, too, without asking.

Then one Thursday a fat, sweaty guy walked into the café and smiled at him. Miron was caught off guard. The last person to give him a smile was Maayan, just before she left him, five months earlier, and her smile had been unmistakably sarcastic, whereas this one was soft, almost apologetic. The fat guy gestured something, apparently a signal that he'd like to sit down, and Miron nodded almost without thinking. The fat guy took a seat.

"Reuben," he said. "Listen, I'm really sorry I'm late. I know we said ten but I had a nightmare morning with the kid."

It crossed Miron's mind that maybe he ought to tell the fat guy he wasn't Reuben, but he found himself checking his watch instead, and saying, "What's ten minutes? Forget it."

Then neither of them spoke for a second, and Miron asked if the kid was okay. And the fat guy said she was, it was just that she'd started a new kindergarten, and every time he took her there she had a hard time letting him go.

"But never mind," he stopped short. "You've got enough on your plate without my problems. Let's get down to business."

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Miron took a deep breath and waited.

"Look," the fat guy said. "Five hundred is too high. Give it to me for four hundred. You know what? Four hundred and ten even and I'm good for six hundred pieces."

"Four hundred and eighty," Miron said. "Four hundred and eighty. And that's only if you're good for a thousand."

"You gotta understand," the fat guy said. "The market's in the shitter, what with the recession and all. Just last night on the news they showed people eating out of garbage cans. If you keep pushing, I'll have to sell high. You're pricing me right out of the market."

"Don't worry," Miron told him. "For every three people eating out of garbage cans, there's someone driving a Mercedes."

This made the fat guy laugh out loud. "They told me you were tough," he muttered with a smile.

"I'm just like you," Miron protested. "Simply trying to keep body and soul together."

The fat guy wiped his sweaty palm on his shirt, then held it out. "Four hundred and sixty," he said. "Four hundred and sixty and I take a thousand." When he saw Miron wasn't reacting, he added: "Four hundred and sixty, a thousand pieces, and I owe you a favor. And you know better than anyone, Reuben, that in our business favors are worth more than money."

This last sentence was all Miron needed to take the outstretched hand and shake it. For the first time in his life, someone owed him a favor. Someone who thought his name was Reuben, but still. And when they'd finished eating, as they argued over who would pick up the tab, a warm feeling spread through Miron's stomach. He beat the fat guy to it by a tenth of a second and shoved the crumpled bill into the waitress's hand.

From that day on it became practically standard procedure. Miron would take a seat, give his order, and keep a lookout for any new person who walked into the café, and if that person started searching the tables with an expectant look, Miron would quickly wave and invite him or her to join him.

"I don't want this to end up in court," a bald guy with thick eyebrows told him.

"Me neither," Miron conceded. "It's always better to settle things amicably."

"Just remember I don't do night shifts," a Botox-lipped bleach blonde announced.

"Just what do you expect? Everyone else will do night shifts except you?" Miron grumbled back.

"Gabi asked me to tell you he's sorry," said a guy with rotting teeth and an earring.

"If he really was sorry," Miron countered, "he should have come and told me himself. No middlemen!"

"In your e-mail you sounded taller," a skinny redhead complained. "In your e-mail you sounded less picky," Miron snapped.

And somehow everything worked out in the end. He and Baldy settled out of court. Botox Lips agreed to ask her sister to babysit so she could do one night shift a week. Rotting Teeth promised Gabi would phone, and the redhead and Miron agreed they weren't quite right for each other. Sometimes they picked up the tab, sometimes he did. With the redhead, they split the bill. And it was all so fascinating, that if a whole morning went by when nobody took a seat across from him at the table, Miron felt let down. Luckily, this didn't happen too often.

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time," he said, "I

the sweaty fat guy when a man with a pockmarked face walked in. Despite his skin and the fact that he looked at least ten years older than Miron, he was good-looking with loads of charisma. The first thing he said as he sat down was: "I was sure you wouldn't show."

"But we agreed to meet," Miron answered.

"Yes," said the pockmarked guy with a sad smile, "except that after the way I yelled at you on the phone, I was afraid you'd chicken out."

"So here I am," Miron said, almost teasingly.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you on the phone," the guy apologized. "Really, I just lost it. But I meant every word I said—you got that? I'm asking you to stop seeing her."

"But I love her," Miron said in a choked voice.

"Sometimes you can love something and you still have to give it up," the pockmarked guy said. "Listen to someone a little older than you. Sometimes you have to give it up."

"Sorry," Miron said, "but I can't."

"Yes you can," the guy shot back. "You can and you will. There's no other way. Maybe we both love her, but I happen to be her husband, and I'm not about to let you break up my family. Got that?"

Miron shook his head. "You have no idea what my life has been like this past year," he told the husband. "Hell. Not even hell, just one great big stale chunk of nothing. And when you've been living with nothing for so long and suddenly something turns up, you can't just tell it to go away. You understand me, don't you? I know you understand me."

The husband bit his lower lip. "If you see her one more time," he said, "I'll kill you. I'm not kidding, and you know it."

"So kill me." Miron shrugged. "That doesn't scare me. We're all going to die in the end."

The husband leaned across the table and socked Miron in the jaw. It was the first time in Miron's life that anyone had hit him so hard. He felt a hot wave of pain surge up somewhere in the middle of his face and spread in every direction. Seconds later, he found himself on the floor, the husband standing over him.

"I'll take her away from here," the husband kept shouting as he went on kicking Miron in the stomach and ribs. "I'll take her far away, to another country, and you won't know where she is. You'll never see her again, you got that, you fucking piece of shit?"

Two waiters jumped on the husband and managed somehow to yank him away. Somebody yelled to the barman to call the police. With his cheek still glued to the coolness of the floor, Miron watched the husband run out of the café. One of the waiters bent over and asked him if he was okay, and Miron made an attempt to answer.

"Do you want me to call an ambulance?" the waiter asked.

Miron whispered that he didn't. "Are you sure?" the waiter insisted. "You're bleeding." Miron nodded slowly and shut his eyes. He tried as hard as he could to imagine himself with that woman. The one he'd never see again. He tried, and for a moment he almost succeeded. His whole body ached. He felt alive.