A Room on the Roof

THAT SUMMER SHE sat on the patio under the rounded awning of the Italian swing, as the straw fringes intertwined with the edges of the cloth dome rustled softly, sounding like forest noises, her eyes on the red glow flowing from the western horizon at sunset, her baby already standing on his own two widespread legs, his chubby fingers grasping the bars of the square playpen made of interlocked wooden bars. The lilylike hibiscus waved its circlet of toothed leaves bound in an envelope of buds, only their heads peeping out of long, laden calyces, pouting like the lips of a coquettish girl, the abundant tranquillity all about deluding only the part of her already dormant, not the part that was driven, tensed toward something beyond the apparent silence, knowing the restlessness of someone under eyes constantly prying but always unseen.

That early winter—the mud, the puddles of cement, and the rusty fragments of iron—already seemed distant and impossible, with the three Arab men giving off the stench of wood smoke and unwashed flesh. The men with their bad teeth, with high-heeled shoes that were once fashionable, now looking oversized, with the leather crushed under the heels.

In her dreams they still visited her sometimes, coming too close to her, which, perhaps, where they live too, could be interpreted as what they might have meant to hint, though perhaps it was done inadvertently. For a long time she wondered about it: did Ahmad draw close
to her unintentionally, touching her legs with his rear as he dragged a sack of cement, with his back to her? And later, was it by chance that his elbow touched her breast when he passed by her, balancing a bag of lime on his shoulder, while she raised her arms to the lintel of the door to check the concrete rim as it dried? And did Hassan really believe that she would invite him in on that black night when he came back for his coat?

That summer, for a long time after they went off without ever reap- pearing, she avoided the roof when it was dark, fearing that they might pop up from behind the high potted plants. Sometimes, when she hap- pened to pass the back corner, which was imprisoned within three walls and served, for the moment, as a storage area, and she saw the tools they had left behind and never came back to collect, a chill would climb up her back like a crawling creature with many legs, stirring a column of water in the depths of her belly like the pitching that afflicts you when you’re seasick.

But there was no one else to accuse. She had brought the whole thing down on her own head. And if her baby wasn’t slaughtered, and her jewels weren’t stolen, and nothing bad happened to her—she should bless her good fortune and erase those two winter months from her memory as if they had never been.

Yoel, her husband, had been opposed to the idea from the moment she had brought it up, still just an idle notion in her mouth and still lacking that fervor, that stubbornness, and that unyielding feeling of necessity that were later to possess her.

“A room on the roof?” He twisted his face and took off his glasses as he did when he was angry. “Do you know how filthy construction is? Do you have a notion how many tons of soil and rocks will fall on your head when they break through the ceiling for the stairs? And I don’t see why we need another room. There are already two unused rooms in the house. And if you want sunlight—you have half a dunam of private lawn.” Against her rebelliously pursed lips, which for a long time, until his initial patience broke down, were to convey a defiant silence, he added, “What gave you this sudden notion of building? What do you need that for, with a four-month-old baby?”

“So why did we take the trouble to run to the engineer and the munici- pality to get a building license?” she countered his argument. “And
didn’t we pay all the fees and the property improvement tax and all that?”

“So we’d have it in hand,” he replied, “so that if we want to sell the house one day—it will be more valuable, with the license already in hand.”

But the idea had already taken root, twisting up inside her with its own force, like an ovum that had embraced the sperm and was now germinating, and the fetus was already stretching the skin of the belly, and there was no way of putting that growth to sleep.

All that time she was wrapped up in her firstborn son, Udi, who summoned her from her dreams at night. She would come to him with her eyes almost closed, as though moonstruck, and her hands turning the tiny baby clothes of their own volition. On her walks, pushing the baby carriage across broken paving stones, past piles of sand, she found herself lingering around houses under construction, raising her head to see the men walking with assurance on the rim of high walls, amazed, learning how stories grow, how windows are squared into dark frames, shutters raised panel after panel by an enormous yellow machine with the look of arm-bones scraped free of flesh.

From one of the yawning holes that would be a window, someone shouted at her with an Arabic accent, “You looking for someone to service you, lady?” She blushed as though caught in wrongdoing and pushed her baby away in a panic. Near a building that she often passed, a contractor told her while looking into the carriage, “Excuse me for saying this, but this is no place to wander around with a baby. Dirt and cinder blocks or iron rods sometimes fall around here, and it’s very dangerous.”

After she started leaving Udi with a baby-sitter in the mornings, a woman who looked after a few infants in her home, she would go to those places in her old trousers worn at the knees, climb up the diagonal concrete slabs, supporting herself on the rough rafters, and grope in the darkness of stairwells still floored with sand. Here, she would later say to herself, she saw them face to face for the first time, in the chill damp peculiar to houses under construction. They came toward her from corners that stank of urine, all of them with the same face: dark, scalding eyes, sunk in caves of black shadows, hair cut in the old-fashioned way, shoes spotted with lime and cement, and dusty clothes.
Here, too, their peculiar odor came to her nostrils: sweat mingled with cigarette smoke and soot. While she exchanged words with the Jewish foreman, oblique glances would be cast at her by the Arab workers, down on all fours laying floor tiles; panting as they transported sacks of cement or stacks of tiles; running to ease the effort; ripping out hunks of food with their teeth, half a loaf of bread in one hand, an unpeeled cucumber in the other.

Some foremen were irritable, refusing to answer her questions, dismissing her with a contemptuous wave of the hand and continuing to give directions to their workers, ignoring her as she stood behind them, ashamed, sensing how the Arabs were laughing at her inside, in collusion with their Jewish foreman. But sometimes the foremen answered her willingly, watching as she took down what they said in her notebook like a diligent pupil. As she turned to leave, they would say with amusement, "So we have to watch out for you, huh? You're the competition!"

In her notebook the pages were already densely packed with details about reinforced concrete, the thickness of inner and outer walls, various gauges of iron rods, a sketch of the way the rods were fastened for casting concrete pillars, the ceiling, plaster, flooring, conduits for electricity and water, tar, addresses of building materials manufacturers. She hid her notebook from Yoel in a carton with her university notebooks. Once, when he asked, "What's going on? Zvika said that twice he saw you coming out of the building they're putting up on Herzl Street," she looked him straight in the eye and said in her usual tone of voice, "Probably someone who looks like me." And he responded, "It's about time you changed your hairstyle. Last week I saw someone from behind, and I was sure it was you. She even had the same walk and the same handbag."

Afterward, when everything was ripe, like a girl coming of age, Yoel came back from work one day, his eyes troubled. He said, "They want me to attend a training course in Texas for two months. We're getting a new computer. I said I couldn't leave you alone with the baby. Let them find someone else." She answered firmly, alarmed at the swift feeling that leapt up in her like the shock wave of an explosion, "I'll be quite all right—you should go." And when the tempest had died down within her she thought: a sign has been sent from heaven.
The day after she saw Yoel to his plane, David, the Jewish foreman, came accompanied by three Arab workers, members of the same family, looking amazingly alike. They all wore old woolen hats. They sat on the edges of the chairs, careful not to ruin the upholstery, with their eyes cast down most of the time. Only occasionally would they raise their eyelids and cast a quick glance at her and the apartment, squinting at the baby on her lap. David wrote down some kind of agreement on a piece of paper, explaining some sentences in Arabic, and they nodded their heads in consent. David copied their names from a form he'd brought with him and their identity numbers from the creased documents they took out of their pockets. He wrote out a description of the dimensions of the room they were to build, detailing the thickness of the walls, the number of electric sockets and their location in the room, the break through the opening for the stairs, the type and color of the plaster. Beside the description he wrote the amounts to be paid as the work progressed. Before signing, she insisted that a final deadline be clearly written, obligating them to finish the work within two months, before Yoel's return.

Then the three of them stood up at the same time and headed for the door. There, on the threshold, after she thanked him for his assistance, David replied, "Think nothing of it, dear lady. It's because I can see you're a fine girl, with an adventurous character. Not many women would do something like this. So here's to you! And if you need something—ask for David in the Hershkovitz building any time. Good luck! They're good workers, up on scaffolds from the age of fifteen," and in her ear softly, "Better than ours, believe me."

Sitting on the open roof that summer, opposite the sky spread above her with rows of painted white clouds, hearing her baby babble, his voice rising and falling as he tried out his vocal cords, she thought: how did things go so far that those men, whose gaze avoided her eyes, who shrank in her presence with shoulders bowed as though narrowing their bodies, answering her questions with a soft voice as though forever guilty, how did it happen that on that first evening in November they sat on the edge of the chairs, and by December they were already marching through her house like lords of the manor, turning on Yoel's radio, opening the refrigerator to look for fresh vegetables, rummaging through the cabinet for fragrant shaving cream, and patting her baby on the head?
At first they still seemed to her like a single person, before she learned that Hassan had elongated eyes whose bright color was like the band of wet sand at the water’s edge. Ahmad had a broad nose, sitting in the middle of his flattened face, between his narrow eyes, his lips thick like an African’s. Salah’s ears were pointed and his cheeks were sunken. Only the pimplies on his face gave it some thickness, making it look like the pocked, thick skin of an orange.

On the first day, they arrived in an old pickup truck that had once been orange, but now on its dented face there were only islands of peeling paint and its windows were missing. They got out and unloaded gray cinder blocks near the parking lot. Then the truck pulled away with a grinding noise, returning in a short while with a long wooden beam on top. After a short consultation among themselves, the truck was parked in the parking lot and the beam laid on an angle, the lower part leaning on the back of the truck and the top rising above the edge of the roof. Until the baby started crying inside the house, she stood at a little distance, her hands in the pockets of her slacks, and watched how one of them drew out a tangle of ropes with a saddle-shaped yoke at the end. He stood on the roof and harnessed himself with knots, looking like a coolie in a historical film. One of the others loaded block after block into the basket on the roof, and the worker on the roof pulled them up along the apartment beam, while the third worker, standing on the edge of the roof, leaned over and gathered the bricks one by one. Examining them from below, she saw how their faces grew sweaty with the effort, and their hands became dusty and scratched by the rough blocks. By the time she had put the baby to bed and come out again, she saw that they had unloaded the rest of the blocks on the lawn and disappeared with the truck, though she hadn’t heard the sound of the motor. The next day, after turning the matter over in her mind for sleepless hours, she decided she must demonstrate her authority over them, and was ready and waiting for them in her window, cradling the baby in her rounded arms, anger lending force to her movements. From the window she shouted at them as they approached, “Why did you leave in the middle of work yesterday? And today ...” She looked at her watch with a clumsy movement, stretching her neck over the baby lying at her breast. “Today you come at nine! You said you’d start working at six! This way you won’t finish in ten months!”
“Lady,” said the one with the golden eyes, insulted, “Today was police roadblocked. Not possible we leave early before four morning, lady.”

Something in her recoiled at the sight of the beaten dog’s eyes he raised up toward her in her window, at the sound of his broken voice. But she, tensing her strength to suppress the tremor that awoke within her, threatening to soften her anger, shouted, “And yesterday what happened? Was also roadblocked?” Maliciously she imitated his grammatical error. “You went away and left half the blocks down there on the grass.”

For the first time she saw the movement that was later to become routine: the jaws clamping down on each other as though chewing something very hard, digging a channel along the line of his teeth. Later she was to learn: that’s how they suppress anger, hatred. They clench their teeth to suppress the wild rage that surges up, that only rarely breaks out and flashes in their pupils.

“Yesterday my friend Ahmad, he hurted his, the nail his finger.”

Behind him his companion raised a bandaged hand, and she looked out of her pretty window, framed with Catalan-style wooden blocks, feeling how the three men in their tattered work clothes were defeating her, looking up at her from their places.

And two hours later, when she had fed and changed the baby and put him to sleep in his crib, her mind was constantly on the uncomfortable feeling that had dwelt in her ever since her conversation with them, when she had spoken to them like a cruel lord of the manor. Now, knowing full well she was doing something she shouldn’t, but still letting the spirit of the moment drown out the voice of reason, she went out of the front door carrying a large tray, bearing a china coffeepot decorated with rosebuds, surrounded by cups with matching saucers, spoons with an engraved pattern, and a platter of round honey cakes. She stood there clutching the heavy tray, her head tilted back, debating whether to put the tray down on the marble landing of the stairs, climb up the wooden ladder that leaned against the building, reaching the edge of the roof, and invite them down for coffee; or perhaps it would be better to call them from where she stood. Relentlessly aware of her ridiculous position, she suddenly discovered she didn’t remember any of their names. Then a head appeared over the edge of the roof, and she found herself calling to him quickly, before
he disappeared, "Hello, hello, I have some coffee for you." Ashamed of the shout that had burst from her, she set down the tray and escaped before one of them came down and brought her offering up to his companions.

That afternoon, placing her wide-awake baby in his crib, she put on old jeans and Yoel's army jacket and climbed up to the roof to see how they were getting along with the work. The tray with the rosebud pattern coffeepot and the pretty cups stood in a corner of the roof, cigarette butts crushed in the remainder of the murky liquid in the saucers. She stood and looked for a long while at the sight, which she would recall afterward as a kind of symbol: the fine Rosental china from the rich collection her grandmother had brought from Germany heaped up carelessly, lying next to sacks of cement and heavy hammers.

"We finished the concrete rim," said Hassan, who seemed to have taken upon himself the task of spokesman. "Now we have to put water and it dry."

"Is it twenty centimeter?" she spoke like them.

"It twenty to the meter" He took a metal measuring tape out of his pocket.

"Is it two centimeters over the edge of the floor?"

It seemed to her they exchanged hurried glances, as if they had conspired together before she came, and she grew tense and suspicious.

"Did you bring it up two centimeters above the floor?" she repeated her question, her voice sharp and higher than at first.

"It twenty to the meter," he told her again.

"But does it come out above the floor or not?"

"Level with the floor," he spread out his hand to emphasize his words, with a satisfied expression, like a merchant praising his wares.

"That means it's no good," she said.

"Why no good, lady?"

"Because the rain will leak in," she said impatiently, her anger growing at the game he was playing with her while the concrete band was drying steadily. "It has to be two centimeters higher. That's what David said to you, and that's what's written in the contract."

"We say David twenty centimeter."

"At least twenty centimeters," she corrected him, her voice rising and turning into a shout. "And of that, two centimeters above the floor."
“There is twenty centimeter, lady,” he said again, his voice like a patient merchant standing up to a customer making a nuisance.

She pursed her lips as if to demonstrate the conversation was useless. She swung her legs over the low wall around the roof and placed her feet on the rungs of the ladder.

“I’m going to get David,” she said to the three men standing and looking at her, anxious to see how things would develop. “If that’s the way you’re starting—then it’s no good,” she added. She went down the ladder with a rush to demonstrate the bellicose spirit that animated her steps, inwardly calculating how long it would take her to get to the building on Herzl Street and locate David, and whether it would be better to take Udi with her, or leave him in his crib and hope he was asleep. Planting her feet on the ground, she strode vigorously toward her car, determined to call David in before the concrete band dried. Then she heard a thick voice calling to her from the roof: “Lady, you don’t need David. We add two centimeters.”

She turned her face upward, suppressing the feeling of relief and victory that surged over her anger, seeking the three dark heads bunched together. “Quickly then, before it dries,” she said in a loud, hard voice.

That evening, her sister Noa declared, her voice coming through the pay phone from Jerusalem mingled with other voices, “You made a mistake about the coffee. Let them make it themselves, and don’t serve them anything anymore. If they enter the house—you’ll never get rid of them.”

“Don’t worry. No one gets into my house without an invitation,” she shouted over the strangers’ voices.

But the next day, in the doorway, smiling to her with his eyes tinted yellow in the winter sun, Hassan, whose name she had learned, said to her, with gentle bashfulness in his voice, “Yesterday lady make coffee. Today I make coffee like in my house.” From a plastic bag he withdrew a container of coffee that gave off a fragrance like the one in cramped spice shops where coffee grinders crush the dark beans into pungent grains.

Taken aback by the friendly gesture, as though they hadn’t sparred with each other the day before, as though she hadn’t been wracked all night long with worry as to how she would mobilize the police and
the courts if they again tried to violate the agreement they had
signed, she took a step backward, and before she grasped what was hap-
pening, he slipped through the space between her body and the
doorjamb, stepped over to the stove, and put the plastic bag on the mar-
ble counter. With precise, expert movements, he took out a long-han-
dled blue coffeepot and a spoon, measured a heaped spoonful of coffee,
added sugar that he poured out of another bag, and filled the pot with
water. Then after fiddling lightly with the lighter and the knobs on the
stove, he lit it and placed the coffeepot on the glowing ring. She observed
his motions with astonishment, stunned at the liberty he took in her
kitchen, her eyes drawn to his graceful, fluent movements, knowing
danger was latent in what was happening before her.

He stood on one foot, his other foot to the side, like a dancer at rest,
peeking into the coffeepot now and then. A hissing rose from it, herald-
ing the onset of boiling, and the spoon in his hand stirred without stop-
ning, with a fixed circular movement. He said, “We put two more
centimeter of cement from yesterday.” And she answered, “Fine, I hope
there won’t be any more problems. David told me you were good work-
er—so do things right.”

Then she combed her hair and washed her face, and before she could
change out of her soft mohair shirt (which had once been burned in
the front by a cigarette, so she wore it only around the house) she found
herself sitting at the table with his two fellow workers, for whom Hassan
had opened the door with a hospitable gesture while she was spread-
ing a cloth on the table in the breakfast nook.

“That’s coffee like in our house,” he said, looking at her, the smile
on his lips not reaching his eyes. She sipped the thick, bitter bever-
age, and smiled involuntarily. “You mean the coffee I made yesterday
wasn’t good?”

“It was good,” he answered quickly, drawing the words out, alarmed
at her insult. “Thank you very much. But we like it this way, strong
coffee.” He clenched his fist and waved it toward her with vigorous
motion, to emphasize his last word.

She heard Udi crying in the next room. This was when he usually
had his first bottle of cereal. She excused herself and got up, sensing
their eyes on her. She took Udi out of his crib, wrapped him in a blan-
et decorated with ducklings, and carried him into the breakfast
nook. Then she placed in his hands the bottle of cereal that had been standing on the windowsill; it was already lukewarm. Ahmad looked as though hypnotized at the sapphire ring Yoel’s parents had given her for their engagement, and the others looked at the baby curled up at her breast in his bright blanket, drinking the cereal with his eyes shut. Hassan smiled suddenly, and his eyes brightened. He enjoyed the sight of the tranquil baby, and he brought his face close to Udi and said fondly, “You eat everything—you be strong like Hassan.”

Months afterward she would remember that morning with dismay, when she had sat with them for the first time, as though they were at home there: drinking from cups like welcome guests, eating off the violet lace tablecloth her mother-in-law had brought from Spain, looking at her baby over their cups. She sipped the bitter liquid and only part of her, the part that didn’t laugh with them, thought: Could these hands, serving coffee, be the ones that planted the booby-trapped doll at the gate of the religious school at the end of the street? Her heart, which had been on guard all the time, began to foresee something, but it still didn’t know: this was just the beginning, appearing like a figure leaping out of the fog. From now on everything would grow clear and roll down like boulders falling into an abyss. The future would clearly be a fall—and no one could stop it.

In the afternoon, as she gathered up the toys Udi had scattered on the carpet, there was a knock on the door. Hassan appeared with a sooty aluminum pot in one hand and a plastic bag imprinted with the name of the supermarket on the main street in the other, a friendly smile of familiarity on his lips, and he said, “Excuse. Can put soup on fire, lady?”

She stood in the doorway, guarding her boundary, with her hand stretched toward the door frame as if halting all entry. But the warm smile on his face and the way he had asked the question left no room for refusal. The blocking arm slipped down, and with cordial hospitality, as though to mask her initial hesitation, she moved her hand in an arc and said, “Please, please.” Anger at herself welled up inside her for treating him, despite herself, as a welcome guest.

She went back to gathering up the toys, stealing a look at the way he put the pot under the faucet with steady movements, like an
expert, boiling water in the blue coffeeepot that he pulled out of the bag, finding the barrel-shaped salt cellar in the right-hand drawer, knowingly manipulating the knobs of the gas stove. While she arranged the toys in Udi's room, as he slept between the duckling blanket and the Winnie-the-Pooh sheet, there stole up in her—still faint, still resembling discomfort—the fear born of having people trespass, pushing her boundary back and pretending they were unaware.

When she returned, the other two were already with him in the kitchen. One was cutting vegetables into her new china bowl. The other was standing at the open refrigerator, his hand in the lower vegetable drawer. By the look on his face she could tell he'd been caught in the act. His hand, rummaging among the vegetables, stopped where it was.

"Need cucumber, lady," he said, stepping back.

She went to the refrigerator, slammed the drawer shut, and took a cucumber out of a sealed bag in the back of the top shelf.

"Take it," she said.

"Thank you very much, lady." He took the cucumber from her hand.

"Lady drink coffee?" asked Hassan from the stove, stirring his coffeeepot and smiling at her in profile.

Confused, fighting to control the muscles of her face, she said, "No thanks."

"Is good coffee," Salah, who spoke only seldom, tried to persuade her.

"Thanks, I don't drink coffee in the afternoon."

"Afternoon, morning—is good coffee." He wouldn't let up. She, already feeling the teeth of the trap closing on her, said, almost shouting, "No!"

She saw Hassan open the china cabinet and take out three plates.

A moment before she abandoned her house and her baby, fleeing to the bedroom and locking the door behind her, breaking out in silent, suppressed, helpless weeping, into which dread was already creeping, she told Hassan in a soft, commanding voice, "I'll thank you not to make any noise—my baby is asleep." A few minutes afterward, when she left her room, her eyes already dry and her voice tranquil though her heart pounded within her, she said, "Maybe you could cook your soup up there. I'll give you a small camping stove. It's inconvenient for me here."

Salah threw her a malevolent glance over his steaming bowl of soup. And Hassan said politely, "If you please, lady, thank you very much."
For five days she heard them arriving, but by the time she had fed Udi and put him to sleep in his crib, her workers were no longer on the roof. Angrily she calculated that in the past two days they hadn’t raised more than a single row of blocks above the stone rim on top of the window. Suspicion stole into her heart that they had taken on another job and, so it wouldn’t slip through their fingers before they finished the construction in her house, they had accepted and bound themselves to another boss. That was the way they did things, as the bank teller who knew about her project had taken the trouble to warn her. But in the afternoon, shaken at the familiar sound of the pickup truck and all the while composing harsh sentences to reproach them with, she saw that the truck was laden with iron rods, thin and thick. The three of them got out of the cab and set about unloading the truck and passing the iron rods from hand to hand up to the roof. Relieved at her window, she watched them at their work. She decided to rest until Udi awoke from his afternoon nap.

For a while she heard them walking around the roof, dragging loads, their voices reaching her through the closed blinds of her room. Later, there was a lot of insistent knocking, which she first took to be part of a dream, and then she heard them at the door. When she opened it, the three of them were standing close to each other, with Hassan half a footstep in front. He said, “Hello, lady, how are you?”

Inwardly bridling at the familiarity he allowed himself in asking that polite question for the first time, and keeping her face frozen, she ignored his question and asked, “Yes?” She was guessing that they would ask permission to heat up their meal.

“Lady, we need some money.”

Her sister had warned her about that in their last conversation: You mustn’t pay them before they’ve done the work as agreed. She tensed. Her voice rasped more than she intended: “Did you finish putting the iron in place for pouring the concrete?”

“We put band around roof.”

“You did the band, but I’m asking about the iron. Did you get the iron ready for pouring the concrete?”

“That’s tomorrow, lady.”

“You’ll get your money tomorrow.”

“We need some. Maybe you’ll give us, lady…”
“Tomorrow,” she said firmly. “Anyway, I don’t have that much now. I have to go to the bank.”

“Really, lady,” Hassan said, looking straight in her eyes and pounding his chest with his fist. “Lady, believe. We coming tomorrow, money or no money.”

“No money,” she said, knowing how Yoel would smile when she told him about this occasion. Hassan turned to his friends, and they put their heads together and whispered. From where she was standing she saw the back of his neck, his dusty hair, looking gray under the woolen hat with the tattered edges, frayed yarn twisting down. His companions’ brows darkened. They put their heads close to each other, taking counsel. One of them pulled a creased wallet from his pocket and seemed to be counting the bank notes in it, his face worried. Inside, she was already prepared to withdraw her position and say, “Look, if it’s something pressing, I’m prepared to give you what I have in my purse now . . .” He suddenly turned to her and asked, “Can wash hands in water?” He surprised her so much with the question that, like the morning when he had stood before her with a cooking pot in his hands, she said, “Certainly, certainly,” pushing the door wide open, while her only wish was to slam the door in their faces.

They entered hesitantly. Now she saw that Salah was holding a large army knapsack, the kind that Yoel used to extricate from the storeroom when his unit was called up for maneuvers. Hassan led the way to the bathroom, looking at her as though asking permission, and the three men made their way in and locked the door. For a long while she heard the sound of running water and the men’s boisterous voices. She, pacing back and forth in the living room, looking out at the large garden with no other house visible, was gripped by sudden fear, thinking of what might be in that big knapsack. Perhaps they were assembling weapons there, spreading the steel parts out on the carpet, as Yoel had once done, kneeling on the floor and joining the shining parts one to another. Maybe they would come out in a little while with their weapons drawn and threaten her and her son. Perhaps they would take them as hostages in their pickup truck. And what about Udi? She had already run out of his special flour, and she wouldn’t be able to feed him when the men kept them there in their broken-down shacks in Gaza, among the muddy paths. They had shown those shacks on an American
television documentary. Maybe, the thought flashed through her like lightning, she should snatch Udi out of his crib and flee with him, lay him in the back seat of her car and drive immediately to the police station on the main street.

Hassan came out first, and she was startled at his appearance. For a second she imagined a stranger had come out. For the first time she saw him without the woolen cap pulled down over his forehead. His hair, surprisingly light, freshly combed and damp, was brushed back over his temples. He wore a dark, well-pressed jacket over a white shirt and tie. His black dress shoes were highly polished.

He told her, “My friends come out minute, lady.”

“ Aren’t you going home?”

“ Have wedding from our aunt in Tulkarem. We today in Tulkarem.”

At that moment the baby let out a screech more piercing than any she’d heard since the morning he had burst forth in the maternity ward: high and prolonged, followed by a sudden silence. She herself let out a scream and rushed to the room, pushing his rolling high chair out of the way as she ran. Udi was prostrate on the floor, lying on his stomach, his face on the rug spread at the foot of his crib, with a toy between his fingers. She bent down and picked him up, carrying him in her arms, and he looked at her with cloudy eyes. She clasped him close to her body and started murmuring words without knowing what she was saying, her heart pounding wildly, making her fingers tremble. After a long while he burst out crying, resting his head on her shoulder, sobbing.

“ Is okay, lady,” Hassan said from the doorway, and she looked around in panic, not realizing he had followed her.

“What?” she asked fearfully.

“ Is okay he like so, lady,” he traced his finger along his cheek and made a crying expression. “ Is nothing. He good that way.”

“What’s good?” she asked as the baby trembled in her arms.

Hassan approached her and gently lifted Udi from her arms. “ Lady, get water,” he said softly. “ He need drink.”

In the kitchen, her hands still trembling, she stood still for a long time, trying to remember where the sugar bowl was. She heard Hassan talking softly to the baby in Arabic, like a loving father talking to his child in a caressing voice, the words running together in a pleasant flow, containing a supreme beauty, like the words of a poem.
in an ancient language, which you don't understand, but which well up inside you. Udi, resting tranquilly on his chest, reached out toward Hassan's dark face, and Hassan put his head down toward the little fingers and kissed them. She, stunned by the sight, stood where she was and looked at them, as the tremor inspired by fear gradually died down, and another, new kind of trembling arose within her, seeing something that, even as it happens, you already yearn for from a distance, knowing that when it passes nothing like it will happen again. And, as though dividing themselves, her thoughts turned to Yoel, whose eyes examined his son with a certain remoteness. Since the baby's birth he had never clasped him to his body and was careful not to wrinkle his clothes or have them smell of wet diapers.

Hassan looked up at her and said, "Hassan have like this at home in Gaza."

"You have a baby?" She was astonished. "You're married?"

"Also like this. Four years," he said proudly, placing his hand parallel to the floor to measure the height of his son.

"You okay," Hassan said in his soft voice, turning his face to the baby.

"You big—you doctor like daddy, yes?"

With the bottle of tea in her hand, she was shaken as though by a distant alarm. Troubled by the suspicion that he knew more than he should, she said, "You can read Hebrew?"

He laughed. "I read one word, another word. I see 'Doctor' on door in English."

"You can read English?" There was some mockery in her voice, like an adult talking to a child about grown-up things.

"I can," he answered in English, for the first time smiling another smile, a hidden one, without the forced humility she was familiar with.

"Where from?" she asked, also in English.

"From the university."

"Which one?"

"The American University of Beirut." She recognized his proper accent from having heard it on television when Arabic-speaking intellectuals were interviewed. She hadn't been able to shake off her Israeli accent in the two years she had lived in Texas, while Yoel finished his degree.

"Really?" She returned to Hebrew.
“Really, lady. I in Beirut two years. Maybe I be doctor that way, of babies.”

“Why didn’t you complete your studies?”

“Hard. Can’t talk.” He looked down at this hands, whose nails were free of lime. “Life like that.”

Shortly after he left, joining his comrades who were waiting for him and watching him from the door, also scrubbed, she thought: They’re nameless and ageless to me, in their faded black sweaters and their dirty elbows and stocking caps. They had a single face and uncouth words came from their mouths. Suddenly they were different: in white collars and jackets, their cheeks shaven, with a wife and baby and a child of four at home.

Even before she heard the bell ring she knew he had returned.

“My jacket, lady,” he said, and went to take his jacket, folded carefully on the back of the chair. And at the door, his back to her, he turned around with a carefully planned motion that made itself out to be spontaneous. “If lady want I stay now.”

“Where?” she asked in astonishment.

“With lady,” he answered seriously. “Mister of lady no here. Maybe need something . . .” And she, stunned at the very words and frightened that he knew of her husband’s absence, wondered if he meant what she thought she had heard. She said, “But you’re going to a wedding, aren’t you?”

“Going to wedding. But if lady want—I can be here . . .”

After she had locked the door behind him, still staggered by his suggestion, she suddenly noticed: Yoel’s scent had emanated from them—the delicate odor of the cologne in the right-hand cabinet next to the mirror. They had used her husband’s toiletries, dried themselves on her towels. She gingerly set Udi down in the crib and hurried to the bathroom.

With jerky movements, like a madwoman, she gathered up the towels and threw them all, averting her head with a bilious sensation, into the washing machine, throwing the new soap into the garbage pail. She began polishing the faucets and sink and scouring with disinfectant the floor which their bare feet had trod on.

But toward evening a new, tense quiet descended on her. At night, before falling asleep, she remembered how Hassan had held Udi
close to his chest and spoken to him in Arabic that sounded like a song; his long fingers, clean for the first time of paint stains; the English he had spoken, sounding like a human language for the first time instead of the broken phrases he knew in Hebrew. Only she preferred to set aside his offer to stay with her and not think about it. She thought back, realizing she had been hard on them. They had gone to a wedding in Tulkarem. Maybe they had asked for money to buy a present for the newlyweds, and she had reacted unfeelingly. The unease that gripped her was assuaged when she promised herself that early the next morning she would take Udi in his carriage and go out to the main street and, in the elegant store that had recently opened, buy clothes for his two children. Then she thought: It would not be right to offer him a gift, as if declaring a special relationship, and not to honor his cousins. Generously she decided she would buy something for them as well. Maybe men's cologne like the kind Yoel kept on his shelf. If the weather was stormy, she'd take Udi in the car. An hour later, she suddenly interrupted herself as she read: if it rained hard, she'd leave Udi at the baby-sitter's.

She waited for them until noon, their gifts in pretty wrapping paper, tied with curling ribbon, lying on the cabinet next to the front door, and the white envelope with their money next to the packages.

At noon she began to worry: maybe they had drunk too much and had an accident. What if the police came? She panicked. Maybe it wasn't legal for her to employ them. If they were badly injured and couldn't continue the job, the construction would be delayed and maybe not completed by the time Yoel returned. In the afternoon, tired and angry at her helplessness and her concern about the future, she decided to go to the building where David was working. Maybe some members of the same family were working for him, and they too had been invited to the wedding in Tulkarem, and she could find out something from them. For a long time she waited for David, pushing the carriage back and forth on the battered pavement in front of the building site. When he came, he told her that the wedding hadn't been in Tulkarem at all, but in a village near the Lebanese border. Two of his own workers went with them in the orange pickup truck. They would be coming as usual the next day, he reassured her, seeing her
worried face. Afterward he scratched the nape of his neck and asked, "So it's okay, the job they're doing?"
"I hope so," she said.
"What are they doing now?"
"They're setting up the iron rods to pour the concrete."
"Are they doing it right?"
"I don't know. I am relying on them."
"Today I'll come and have a look."

The next day, anger making her fingertips tremble, so agitated her breathing was affected, she waited for them on the roof in the morning after leaving Udi with the baby-sitter and arranging to do so again during the coming days. Hassan got out of the cab and smiled brightly at her. With his filthy woolen cap and his shoes down at the heel he was once again what he had been.
"Something happen, lady?" His voice betrayed his surprise at finding her on the roof at that early hour.
"A great deal has happened," she shouted at him, leaning over the wall at the edge of the roof.
"What's the matter, lady?" he asked, climbing the ladder on his way up to her.
"First of all, you lied to me."
"Lied?" The shadow of his smile was erased.
"The wedding was in Tulkarem?" She flung out the words, her hand on her hips, like a mother arguing with a child caught out in a lie.
"No lady. Wedding not in Tulkarem."
"That's what you told me."
"I said my aunt from Tulkarem. The wedding not. There is village near Kibuss."

He turned to face his comrades, as though asking, and Ahmad said, "Kibuss Ga'aton."
"Ga'aton," Hassan repeated the name of the kibbutz, looking at her again,
"But you didn't say you wouldn't come to work yesterday."
"We think sleep in Tulkarem and come work yesterday. No possible."
"That's one thing," she ignored the explanation. "Another thing, David was here yesterday and he said you didn't do anything well.
You didn't raise the concrete band two centimeters the way we said. And you put in number-eight iron rods instead of number twelve, and you made one wall with fifteen-centimeter blocks instead of twenty centimeters...

"That wall has window, lady. Must be little."

"You need a number-three block near the sliding window," she exploded at his effort to fool her. "But it is an outer wall. You were supposed to use twenty-centimeter blocks," she added, berating him, watching how the color ebbed from his face, and how his comrades froze behind him.

"We do everything good. Lady want—David come here. We talk."

"I don't want you to talk!" she screamed. "I want you to work. You've been working for a month. What you've done could have been done in a week. You just drink coffee, disappear, and work somewhere else."

"Somewhere else?" he asked in amazement.

"On Monday. Where were you?"

He wrinkled his forehead in thought. "Monday we bring iron."

"Fine," she said, raising her chin and walking forward with vigor, sitting on the edge of the wall. "I want to see how much you get done today."

For seven hours she sat on the wall, without moving, not going down to turn off the water heater she had lit in the morning, suppressing the hunger that rose within her, the need for a cup of coffee at the hour when her body was used to one, and, in the afternoon, fighting the pain in her back, which cried out for something to lean on, watching as they worked angrily, talking little, boiling water in an empty can on the camping stove she'd lent them, sitting down to eat with their legs crossed, close to each other, whispering to each other. All those hours she watched them as though riveted to the spot, only occasionally looking away from them, allowing her eyes to wander to the tops of the cypress trees and the purple mountains in the distance, the view of which, at a peaceful time, she would usually enjoy. Later, when she recalled that morning, she would tremble as though the event were not irrevocably in the past: How had she had the courage to treat them that way? They could easily have come and pushed her, and she would have fallen and broken her neck. By the time anyone found her among the iron rods in the backyard, she would no longer be alive.
Occasionally Ahmad cast a glance at her, like a fearful child checking to see whether the ghost he had seen was still hovering in the vicinity. But Hassan didn’t look at her once. Seeing him, his clamped lips, and the line drawn along his jaw above his clenched teeth, she knew she had deeply hurt him, but she felt no remorse for doing so—only the sweet consolation of someone who deals justly with herself, an overwhelming feeling that rose and fell within her.

They raised the iron rods over the edge of the masonry walls and laid them crosswise at regular intervals, tying them with thin wire. Afterward they crowded steel struts into the room to support the wooden boards under the netting. When they had finished and consulted among themselves for a moment, they headed for the ladder, bidding her good-bye with a slight nod.

"Wait," she called to them. "You’ve earned your money." She followed them down the ladder and went into the house. When she came out, she put the envelope in Hassan’s hand. Only after they had left without a word did she remember that she hadn’t asked them to sign a receipt for the money, nor had she given them the wrapped parcels from the cupboard.

The next day, after leaving Udi with the baby-sitter despite a reddish rash on his skin indicating that his diaper hadn’t been changed in time, she was already waiting for them on the roof as though spoiling for a fight. Today, she thought, excited at the idea, they’ll pour the concrete for the roof. The network of iron rods was prepared and the steel struts were in place. The wooden forms were raised, the buckets of gravel and sand were covered under plastic sheets, and the sacks of cement were arranged next to them. Today they would pour the roof, and the weather was fine. The transparent clouds didn’t herald rain.

When she heard the sound of the pickup truck and leaped to the edge of the roof, it seemed that even before she could actually see them she had noticed his absence. Three men sat in the cab, but he wasn’t one of them. Salah and Ahmad got out of the left door, wearing gray woolen hats. Then a man with a shaven head got out of the truck, looking like a fugitive she had seen in an Italian movie, who had made his way to a widow’s home in a village and laid siege to it. In one glance she took in his black eyes, like the maw of a coal mine, his eyebrows meeting over the bridge of his nose. The strange feeling of an unpop-
ular girl overcame her, like when all her girlfriends had been asked to
dance, and she was left alone sitting by the wall, gazing at the legs mov-
ing in the dark.

"Where's Hassan?" she asked Ahmad.

"Hassan no come. This one come, Muhammad."

Observing them from her corner on the wall, trying to repress the
desolate feeling that grew ever stronger within her, she watched
them put on rubber boots and mix the cement with shovels, adding
sand and gravel and pouring water, stirring it to produce a thick gray
mixture in the square they had enclosed with wooden beams. Then
Muhammad climbed up to the edge of the roof. Ahmad handed him
bucket after bucket brimming with the gray concrete, and he swung
and emptied them in big arcs over the network of iron rods, while Salah
quickly filled in the space between the two wooden planks below, to
stop the concrete from dribbling out.

Sitting erect on the edge of the roof, her knee swinging, her arms
folded, she felt her disappointment give way to anger at Hassan's absence.
Suddenly it became clear to her that he had come between her and
them, serving as a kind of protective barrier from them. Here she stood
exposed before the three of them: Salah stole furtive glances at her,
as though already hatching a foul plot in his mind; Ahmad smiled directly
at her, baring his yellow teeth like the fangs of a beast; and the new
worker, standing high on the upper concrete band, his body tense, his
hands on his hips, ogled her openly. From where she sat his figure looked
frightening, and his shaven head resembled a crooked egg against the
background of the sky above him.

She sat where she was for hours, not because of the anger that had
gripped her the previous morning, which had made her decide to sit
and see with her own eyes how well they would work under super-
vision, but rather out of fear to get up and raise her legs over the edg
of the roof in front of them. They worked without stopping, diligently
bringing up the contents of the big pool of concrete and spreadin
it on the network of rods. From time to time they would confer wit
each other, exchange shouts in Arabic, sing a line or two, laughing ou
loud into their hands. And she, sensing they were laughing at her, w
angry, insulted, and fearful. She watched them cook their meal
kneeling next to each other on the torn mat, tearing with the
teeth at loaves of bread they held in their hands.

"What now?" She turned to Ahmad, keeping her voice steady.

"Now must dry."

"If it rains?"

"Two hours—good. Not two hours—no good."

"The roof is twenty centimeters?"

"Yes, yes," he said, and she thought that since the morning she hadn't heard them say "lady." She turned, pointed at the floor they had left spotted with cement. "Wash that down before it dries," she ordered, pretending she still had power.

"No dry. We put water."

She stepped to the edge of the protruding ladder and grasped the wooden rung and, as though incidentally, turned to them, "What's the matter with Hassan?"

"Hassan no come."

"I see that."

"This one Muhammad come."

"Will Hassan come tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow—Hassan no come."

"Did something happen to him?"

"He not here."

She carefully raised her legs, and when she had descended, even before her feet touched the ground, she heard their deep, guttural laugh, and she blushed. That was how men laughed at a woman when they spoke ill of her.

The next day, waiting at the window, she knew why her legs had taken her there, why she had arisen early to prepare the kitchen, why she had checked how much coffee was left in the bag he had brought with him from home.

Salah and Ahmad came alone. She, knowing in her heart she wouldn't see Hassan again, was glad the shaven-headed Muhammad wasn't with them. Swallowing her pride she went out and stood before them.

"Is Hassan sick?" she asked.

"No sick."

"He won't come to work?"

"He work someone."
“Why isn’t he working here? Three will finish faster.”

Salah, perhaps seeing through her deceptive sentences, smiled somewhere in the depths of his eyes, the mockery of someone careful not to be tripped up.

“He no want come to lady.”

“He doesn’t want to work here?”

“No want,” said Salah, and she imagined she heard an echo of triumph in his voice.

“He doesn’t want to get his money?”

“No want money, no want lady,” he said. She no longer had anything to say after that sentence, but she spoke in her normal voice: “Very well, then finish by yourselves. You can make coffee in the kitchen if you want. There’s still some of the coffee you brought.”

Salah and Ahmad kept coming for a few more days after the concrete on the roof had dried, removing the steel struts that had held up the forms. They put in the door and bars over the window and broke through the upper room into the breakfast nook. She didn’t ask about Hassan again, but they sometimes volunteered that they had seen him. She, stirred by the sound of his name, gave in to them and made the final payment before they had completed the work. Perhaps they would run into Hassan and tell him of her generosity. But they never came back. They left the walls unplastered and forgot their tools behind the wall. Shaken with fury, again pushing her baby carriage, she roamed among the construction sites and hired workers to finish the plastering, the tarring of the roof, and the installation of the electric wiring.

By the time Yoel returned she had a new hairstyle. The stairs had been installed, leading to the bright, pleasant room on the roof, with three barrels in the corners from which palm trees sent up sharp bayonets all about, their fronds growing like a magic trick. He stood in amazement before the new structure and then burst out laughing. “Well, I’ll be . . . You leave a woman for two months, come back—and the world’s changed!” On the roof, his arm around her shoulder in a gesture of respect, he wandered from one corner of the roof to another, inspecting the landscape and sliding his hand along the walls: “I didn’t want to do it, I confess, but it’s really nice. Was it very messy?”
"Not so terrible."
"You found good workers?"
Stroking the rough wall unconsciously, she said, "They were relatively decent, workers from the territories."
"What, Arabs?" he asked, looked at her reproachfully, turning solemn.
"Arabs. You can't find anyone else. But every day a Jewish foreman came to keep an eye on them, the one working in the building at Herzl Street."
"They behaved all right? They didn't make trouble?"
She took a quick, deep breath, with a whistling sound, and, restraining the whirlpool of emotions stirring within her, looked away, clearly seeing Muhammad standing on the edge of the upper roof, staring at her with hatred, and the flash in their eyes when she got up and stood in this very place and accused them; seeing Hassan's fists clench and the crease along the line of his jaw when he clamped his teeth shut, hearing the rumble of the men's laughter when she raised her legs to climb down the ladder. "They were fairly decent. Once Udi fell down and I was really alarmed. One of them picked him up so very gently and calmed him down, you wouldn't have believed it. He spoke to him softly and kissed his fingers. Then it turned out he had studied medicine for two years. He wanted to be a pediatrician but for some reason he didn't finish his degree. He has a baby Udi's age and another boy of four..." Suddenly she noticed the softness flowing into her voice, betraying herself to herself, and she added loudly, more stridently than she intended, "But once they made some trouble about the money and tried to trick me by putting in iron rods that were too thin. Arabs, you know..."

Translated from the Hebrew by Jeffrey M. Green