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BABY ZANGO WALKS

BABY ZANGO'S FATHER, ANDRUSH, LEFT HUNGARY after the Second World War when it became clear that things were not going to get better for a long time. He had been second violinist in the Hungarian State Symphony Orchestra, but upon arriving with his pregnant wife in Toronto he sold his violin. This, in his eyes, was a promise wrapped in a gesture: music, he realized, was not going to provide for his family. Instead, he opened a flower shop. He was no great floral artist, but he was pleasant and competent, and his customers returned often enough that the shop did what it was meant to do.

Five months after Andrush and his wife, Eszter, landed and moved into subsidized housing, Baby was born. Mr. and Mrs. Zango had planned to give their baby a proper name—Hungarian, of course, but easily Anglicized—at the circumcision, which by tradition would take place eight days after the birth. Until then, the hospital-issued birth certificate used *Baby* as a placeholder. But the doctor performed the circumcision without permission or warning, and the Zangos, who were more practical than religious, canceled the rabbi and the *mohel* and the white fish salad order and never got around to informing the hospital what they wanted their baby's name to be. Nobody asked. Nobody noticed or cared that these immigrants had named their child *Baby*. Or maybe the hospital staff thought *Baby* was a normal name in whatever country these people came from. And the Zangos, too intimidated by the required paperwork, not wanting to cause a fuss, never changed Baby's name.

Baby's childhood was, for the most part, unremarkable, at least by immigrant-parent standards. By the third grade his English literacy had surpassed that of his parents: he read and translated the mail, answered the telephone, and explained the television shows. (The Zangos were obsessed and mystified by *Candid Camera* and *I've Got a Secret*.) When his mother would sing, loudly and terribly, while making dinner, Baby translated the

neighbour's shouts as polite requests to keep it down and his mother's surly curses as apologies and promises not to do it again.

Baby wasn't particularly gifted, but he had all the traits and lineaments of the severely gifted, as he was often carelessly clothed and appeared restless, fragile, and quiet. Many teachers tried to nurture Baby, and one teacher in particular—Mr. Klyne, who taught English and shop—thought he detected promise, perhaps even genius, that was somehow suppressed by tragedy. He positioned himself as Baby's mentor, wizened confidante, or informal therapist, and he took the boy on long walks in Earl Bales Park and lent him books by other troubled geniuses—Joyce, Woolf, Kafka—that he thought might let his inspiration loose.

As it turns out, Mr. Klyne was right about the tragedy part (though who knows if the tragedy was restraining promise, blocking inspiration, or having any effect at all) because Baby as an infant had inadvertently murdered his mother's best and really only friend, Krisztina. Krisztina had also immigrated from Hungary but had adapted much better and quicker to her new life than Baby's mother. She had even secured a job at a local bank, where she fearlessly made small talk with the customers. In those early years, before Baby could translate this world to his mother, before she could follow even basic English, before she could make sense of the newspaper or radio or neighbours, she relied on Krisztina as her portal to anything beyond the Zangos' three-room apartment. Anyway, here is what happened. Baby, not quite fourteen months old, was sitting in the kitchen and playing with a steak knife, grasping it from either end, putting the knife in his mouth, dropping and throwing and banging it—in short, doing whatever infants do with whatever they are holding. Krisztina, who came over at least three times a week with homemade babka and expertly curated gossip, was the first to notice Baby and his dangerous plaything. She hurried over to relieve Baby of it but slipped on one of his toys—a wooden train car with matte red wheels that squeaked when rolled backwards. Krisztina fell, and she fell on the knife, which Baby was still holding in his infant grip. The knife pierced her navel—an eight-inch incision that cut straight through the peritoneum and sliced the abdominal aorta. (Baby, in his teens, obsessively studied the likely medical details.) Baby, his plaything now wrested away and irretrievable, walked out of the kitchen towards the muted black-and-white television in the living room, while Krisztina lay in a widening puddle of blood. These were his first unaided steps.

After enough gentle if unsubtle prodding, Baby eventually told this story to Mr. Klyne, though the details came not from his own memory but from that of his father, who spoke about the event every so often in a kind of horrified incredulity, as if recalling a bad dream. Mr. Klyne realized that he was in over his head, therapy-wise, and gradually backed off. Baby never particularly cared for Mr. Klyne's attention anyhow.

It was in high school that Baby first showed literary promise. His essays and papers were scattershot and semi-coherent at best, marked by a near-pathological refusal to stay on topic, but his sentences, whatever they were or were not about, could barely contain their own power. His more literary teachers described them as *alive* or *pulsating*. And his titles, though technical failures, were magical. Many years later Baby's geography teacher even borrowed the title of one of Baby's tenth-grade papers for his second novel. The teacher never asked permission, but he did give unelaborated thanks to a *Baby Z* in his introduction.

As a teenager, Baby was confident enough that would-be bullies found him unnerving and stayed away, despite his name. Girls found him aloof but irresistible, in large part because of his name. His entire life, in fact, people wanted to be close to Baby, to be familiar and even intimate with him, just so they could say his name. Girls and even grown women would daydream what it might be like to affectionately whisper *Baby* into his ear, how that single atom of communication might explode whole destinies. Teachers during the first few weeks of class would blush, pretend not to see Baby's occasionally raised hand, or even skip roll call altogether. (It takes some time to accustom yourself to calling your student *Baby*.)

Baby had his first kiss in the eighth grade. She was chubby and had braces, but she was the only girl in the grade with breasts that showed. About fourteen months after this kiss, he began going steady with a girl named Jane, who, in his parents' eyes, had enough beauty and grace to compensate for her non-Jewishness. They dated for the remainder of high school, and on more than one occasion came close to loving each other or whatever the high-school equivalent of love is. Baby, first at Jane's urging and eventually at his parents' and ultimately at nobody's, would bring Jane to dinner once a week. Baby's parents were in awe that their son was assimilating so successfully, as Jane's father was a prominent heart surgeon and her mother was a renowned academic. Though it was never openly discussed, however, her background embarrassed them. While they had certainly improved

their economic lot since arriving in Canada—they now owned one automobile and leased another; made a point to go on an annual vacation, usually to Montreal; and did not look that carefully at grocery prices—the Zangos still lived in the same three-room apartment behind Finch Street and their most-prized piece of furniture, perhaps even possession, was a velvet couch with faux-gold legs shaped like a generic feline's.

On the last Friday that Jane and Baby were both living in Toronto—Jane would be attending a private all-women's college in New Hampshire, Baby the University of Toronto as pre-med—Jane broke up with him at his parents' table. She was surprised that Baby hadn't seen it coming. He didn't think they would be able to do this forever, did he? Baby told her he didn't know, hadn't thought about it, hadn't planned for anything. Baby's parents understood enough of the slang-pocked conversation to realize they weren't meant to be its audience, so they slipped into the living room and turned on the TV. Baby waited a ten-count and without a word to Jane walked in after them. Jane sat alone at the table, finished her sponge cake, and left.

For Baby's graduation present his parents bought him a round-trip ticket to Budapest. He said goodbye to his classmates after the ceremony, knowing and not caring that he might never see them again, and flew out the next morning.

In Budapest Baby stayed with a second cousin, Gabor, who was a poet—or at least that was the reputation upon which his life was built. In truth, Gabor hadn't written a poem since before Baby was born, though he talked and acted like he produced a great deal of poetry. He wasn't a fraud—his early poems were well-read and -respected, if a little dated—but as a poet he was permanently dormant and secretly satisfied with that. By dusk on most days Gabor was pleasantly drunk, and within a week so was Baby. Gabor lived in a one-bedroom flat off Heroes' Square, and Baby would alternate between the couch and, when he was brave or drunk enough, Gabor's bed. There was nothing sexual about it.

Baby loved it: the minor poets' minor but dramatic squabbles, the major poets' utter indifference to everything but themselves, the readings attended by more government agents than civilians (it was comic how they stood out, with their suits and official watches and unembarrassed incomprehension), how a conversation over a beer could be silent, and how the arguments about art and politics had nothing to do with either art or politics.

Baby would sit a half-beat removed from the action and take it all in, like he was sipping at the experience. One night he met a girl—a student who was planning/dreaming to be an actress, or maybe a muse, and sat at the periphery of the huddled circle of aspiring and slightly dated poets (the few real poets were in the centre of the circle, holding court), pretending to read. She had a sort of beauty that Baby had never encountered before—a beauty its possessor didn't accentuate or highlight or leverage or even acknowledge. It just was. Her name was Eva.

Something developed between Baby and Eva, though Baby could not say exactly what it was. Every day they would sit on stools at the bar, their dangling legs in intersecting orbits, sipping espresso and beer and, when day broke, espresso again. They spoke about nothing and kissed when they ran out of conversation. It never progressed beyond that. Baby was the first foreigner, let alone Canadian, she'd ever met, and she felt embarrassed around him, provincial, and held back. But Baby at the time didn't understand any of this, and over the course of the summer he overinterpreted Eva's distance until he drove himself mad. On the night before Baby left Budapest, Eva gently rejected Baby's advances—not because she wasn't interested, Baby later realized, but because she was—and Baby, frustrated, walked out of her apartment. Outside, away from Eva, Baby's impotence and humiliation hardened, and he felt reckless and greedy. A few hours later he made love to a woman ten years his senior whose name he did not care to learn how to pronounce.

Baby only got through anatomy and introductory biology before dropping pre-med and switching to comp lit. In a class on Communist literature he met Adam, the only other student who hadn't done the reading and wasn't ashamed of it. Baby and Adam discovered that they had similar likes and dislikes—books and sports, respectively—which they never tired of discussing. The two became close. Adam was a writer, or was planning to be one. The university's literary magazine had published a short story of his titled *Crooked Voices Keep Talking at My Head*, which Baby could not decide whether he liked or not: it consisted of two possibly human voices that could not agree on anything except the sacredness of sex. The best line, Baby thought, went like this: *The feeling good part is not incidental.*

After a period when everyone but Adam could see it coming, Adam dropped out of school and moved to a basement apartment on Queen Street,

in a section of Toronto that was still gritty and underground and romantic. There, every day, Adam and Baby experimented with modish drugs and talked at each other for hours. Baby, who was still nominally living with his parents, often slept on the futon, occasionally with a girl. Adam didn't seem to mind the arrangement, and Baby never seemed to be interrupting anything. If Adam were home, as he often was, he'd grab his notebook and excuse himself.

One spring morning Baby flipped through Adam's meticulously dated marble notebook. All of Adam's writing seemed like nonsense—incoherent syllables and words of no discernible language. It took Baby a while to match the entries with what had happened on that particular day, but eventually he realized that Adam had been transcribing Baby and Baby's partner's carnal noises. He read the pages of moans and screams and yips and wondered if that was what his sex sounded like and what his sex *should* sound like. Baby, more curious than upset, confronted Adam. Adam sat silently and then said that it was avant-garde poetry—communication operating at its purest level. He said that he needed poetry, that he needed Baby, and that he needed this. He began to sob and said that Baby was his muse, his only and eternal reason to exist, and that if Baby were ever to leave him he'd kill himself by walking off a cliff. Baby told Adam he didn't know how to respond. Adam asked if he, Baby, loved him. Baby said no, then, after a few silent minutes, left the apartment, and Adam walked off a cliff.

Baby convinced himself that it wasn't his fault, and on the advice of his counselor—his parents were never fully apprised—he took a leave of absence from school and returned to Budapest. Gabor and Gabor's tiny universe hadn't changed a bit, though Baby was now less receptive, less inclined to view it so romantically. He grew restless during the countless beers and intermittent toasts, and the arguments about nothing now bored him. The poets seemed fatuous, the girls sad and desperate.

After less than two weeks Baby couldn't take it anymore; he felt like he was being hollowed out. He thought about returning to Toronto, but couldn't, not yet, and had nowhere else to go, so he applied for and got a job at the only English advertising firm in Hungary. He wrote copy for postcards. It's here that Baby coined the phrase *Wish you were here!* It first appeared in a slanted faux-script in the corner of a postcard that framed a famous Budapest bathhouse—an immense and jagged Gothic thing that

in any other city would have been mistaken for a castle. Baby was instantly regarded as something of a prodigy, and within a week of landing the job he moved out of Gabor's flat, booked the first room he found, and bought a cast-iron skillet and new linens. He lived like this for months.

One night Baby saw Eva in a café. She was with a flock of pretty girls; he was alone and reading *The Power and the Glory*. Both were initially unsure: their eyes sought and avoided each other's for one chapter and then another, until the excitement overwhelmed the uncertainty. Eva ushered out her friends, who were already linking arms and speculating who this strange but cute boy might be, and he tabled his book, losing his place. She sat down across from him. They stared at each other like two unrelenting gamblers until their smiles exploded and betrayed them. They embraced.

Eva had been accepted into the National Academy and was already an actress of some repute. Her beauty had blossomed; it was a statement now rather than the suggestion it had been. Eva spoke of maniacal directors and brilliant scripts, of lurid suitors and crippling hours. Baby didn't say much. He didn't specify why he was in Budapest, and Eva only asked once.

Baby and Eva finished a bottle of wine. The café was due to close, and the staff was growing impatient with this foreigner and his local girl. The waiter snatched their glasses, snuffed the candle, took Baby's money, and never came back with change. It was raining heavily when they left, and they stood under the awning, rooted by indecision, watching the cobblestones shimmer in refracted moonlight. Then Baby grabbed Eva's hand and they ran like this from awning to awning, stopping beneath each one just long enough to kiss. On the fourth or fifth awning Eva turned her head, evading his. There was someone else somewhere, and she just couldn't, it wouldn't be fair, not to Baby or her or him, and she didn't even have to pretend to cry. Baby kissed Eva one last time, now on the rain-streaked cheek he faced, promised to write, and walked on into the wall of rain.

Not long after that night Baby resolved to return to Toronto and restart his pre-med studies. He now sought comfort, not refuge, and Toronto seemed to promise that. But his decision wasn't a stable one, and a series of extraordinary coincidences and happenings left him shaken and unsure. He saw one particular stranger—a woman in weary-grey riding boots—a dozen times over the course of two days. An unfamiliar parrot called him by name, first and last. His tongue turned orange for a full day. His eyesight improved,

his feet shrunk a size, and every pretty girl he met was born on April 28th. He ignored this for a while, pretending that it was of no consequence, but it continued until his skepticism ran out and he asked, to no one in particular, what it all meant. That night Theodor Herzl, whom Baby had never heard of before, appeared to him in a dream. He levitated above a chair of orchid petals that sang operatically before melting into three intertwined elephant trunks. Then he introduced himself—his voice was high, almost squeaky, but perfectly audible—and told Baby that Israel needed him. When Baby asked why he shouted *Destiny!* in his mousy voice. *In a few months there will be a war, and you will find meaning and fulfilment.* Then he was swallowed by his hat, which burped.

Baby woke up, gave notice at his firm, and booked a flight to Tel Aviv. He didn't tell anyone about the dream. To Gabor he said some nonsense about art and self and searching, and Gabor, to his credit, understood something: he didn't press Baby, just wished him luck, health, fortune, and lots of Mediterranean pussy.

Baby landed in Tel Aviv, found lodging, and slept. In the morning he reported to the draft office. He didn't say anything about the dream or Mr. Herzl, just unfurled a messy speech, in English, about responsibility and Jewish history and destiny and freedom and the Holocaust and the diaspora and homeland. He didn't know if the draft officers understood a word he said, but they signed him up and sent him to training. He was given a gun—a battered and chipped Soviet-made AKM—and told that it should be treated like a limb—attached at all times. Baby loved his gun and its serious weight, its pull on his shoulder and rhythmic bounce on his thigh, the gentle curve of its clips, the hyper-engineered parts, the sad red of the bullet's tip.

Two weeks into his training—where Baby was bruised and perpetually out of breath but stubborn and improving—the War of '67 broke out. Israel was taken by surprise and forced to scramble: all reserves and even new recruits were mobilized. Baby, his Hebrew functionally useless, was sent to the northern front to carry ammunition and communications gear for the large gun (which the guys called *Hakalba*, the bitch) and her handler. He learned quickly to hear the gun's warm-up whistle and to warn his ears and crouch while feeding the chain of bullets. Baby never saw what they were shooting at. The gun shot at targets that were kilometres away, obscured by haze and fog, and safely abstract. In two weeks the war turned, the momentum shifted, and the doubts of survival dissolved into an unspoken assur-

ance of victory, but the only immediate change Baby could see was the faint smile on the gunner's face where before there had only been a stoic line.

On what turned out to be the second-to-last day of the war Baby overheard on the radio a lieutenant asking for Baby Zango. That's all he understood in the radio's Hebrew cackle—that and the word *eema* (mother). Baby knew instantly—it was knowledge verging on the prophetic—that his mother had died, that her death had been painless, that she loved him and missed him, and that he no longer had to do what he was doing. Baby walked off the battlefield like it was a stage, past the tanks and infantry, past the bewildered soldiers and army brass, past the pop-up headquarters and the collapsible mess hall. Neither war nor victory held his interest any longer.

Baby did not return to Toronto, even after he received confirmation of his mother's death. When he aerogrammed his father, asking if he should come home to help out around the house and the shop and in general, his father replied with a postcard—four words scribbled on the back of a picture of a famous Hungarian bathhouse: *Your worry is misdirected*. Baby stuck that postcard into the frame of the mirror in his bedroom—a room so narrow it squeezed the sides of his cot—in an apartment he shared with five other unemployed men and women.

In those days it was not difficult to get by in Tel Aviv, to keep distracted and fed and high. Baby, like everyone else he knew, pissed away his time in the cafés on Dizengoff Street, sipping coffee and imported beer, affecting a European nonchalance. He introduced himself as a poet well before he wrote poetry, and his foreignness lent him a certain credibility so that when he finally did write something it was taken more seriously than it perhaps deserved. He wrote only on postcards—on the picture side. The idea, or so went his artistic credo at the time, was that the postcard remained functional and that his art merely added to, rather than diminished or denied, the postcard as a mode of communication. His most famous postcard—eventually included in a well-respected Israeli anthology and purchased but never shown by the Tel Aviv Museum of Contemporary Art—was a photograph of an empty beach interrupted by a close-up of a boy in swimming trunks, hands on hips, his oversized hat (his mother's?) covering nearly his entire face. Baby's words start in the sky, up and to the right of the hat: *your worry is misdirected / listen, please, to these incessant whispers of serene / and smoothing hope / and it will all be over soon*.

One of Baby's female roommates was named Sarit. She was Israeli from birth and in spirit. She was raised on a kibbutz in the north, handled farm animals and crops at the age of nine, could competently wield a firearm not long after, and claimed to not have worn clothes until she was well into her teens. She played the guitar not well, but with passion and without reserve, and her voice was gorgeously low and throaty. Baby was smitten, but for those first few months in the apartment Sarit was with another roommate, Amir, and considered Baby a harmless, irrelevant Canadian. Wimpy, almost by definition.

Amir was the head of a local anarchist group, the Battalim, who were considered dangerous enough by the authorities that a government official—not uniformed, but he might as well have been given his conspicuousness—watched their apartment from the bench across the street, noting who was entering, who was exiting, and how much time passed in between. Baby became tangentially involved with the Battalim in order to be closer to Sarit. He wrote headlines for their leaflets, edited their manifestos, and attended meetings in their tiny kitchen, during which he slipped Sarit folded papers hiding dashes of poetry. Sometimes she'd read them, sometimes she wouldn't—either way, she'd bite the inside of her cheek and peer at Baby sidelong for a second.

Then one day Amir disappeared. Nobody asked any questions, Baby didn't hesitate, and two weeks later Sarit moved into Baby's room. For the next six months they lived in a world inhabited by no one else. Sarit worked part-time as a sales clerk at a health food store, directing overconscientious young men and pregnant women to the appropriate vitamins, and Baby did some freelance translating and interpreting (by then his Hebrew was fine). During the evenings they would drink cheap wine with their artist friends, or Baby would write on his postcards and Sarit would sit cross-legged next to him with her guitar, rewriting her perpetually in-progress songs (one of which was, years later, a very popular Israeli hit, though sung by someone else) and tussling with Baby's hair. They made love constantly and with rhythm. Sarit purred when he entered her and sometimes hiccupped when she came. Baby could not get enough of her sounds.

In the summer, after living in Tel Aviv for nearly two years, Baby received a message from his father: he needed Baby's help in the shop, which meant he needed help, period, and Baby should please come home. Baby read the message twice, folded it, and put it in the pocket of his ragged jack-

et. He did not tell Sarit until a few days later, when he said he had to go home and he wasn't sure for how long; it could be a while. He showed her the creased letter and invited her to come with him. Sarit didn't hesitate. She owned nothing and didn't love anything except Baby. She said, in Hebrew, that it was a *destined accident* and began packing.

Baby visited the flower shop as soon as he arrived in Toronto. He hadn't been inside since high school, so its decline came as an ungradual shock: the paint was shedding, the wallpaper and décor—so *inviting* in Baby's memory—were now dated and oppressive, and the lighting was beyond dreary; even the freshest flowers seemed to droop. Baby realized that everything had to be replaced, refreshed, and renovated. His father, who had never properly understood infrastructure or capital costs (*It's all about service*, he used to love to say. *In that they can't compete!*), protested at first, claiming that they didn't need it; that the customers cared about the flowers, not the shop; and that they liked him, trusted him, and were loyal to him. But Baby didn't listen, and as business improved his father's protests gradually died.

Baby and Sarit had few friends in Toronto. They spent their nights at home, in a flat on the floor below Andrush's. Every evening Baby would bring home a specially picked bouquet, and they'd drink and write and play guitar, just like always, and make love on the best mattress either of them had ever been on. In the fall, a few weeks after arriving, Baby showed Sarit his elementary school. They jumped a fence and walked onto the untended grass lot where he had experienced his first kiss, his first home run, and his first and only fight, and they danced barefoot for a long time and traded empty clichés about the stars. They went to Niagara Falls, pretending to be newlywed members of the Israeli royal family, and never actually saw the falls. Baby took Sarit ice skating at City Square. He placed her hands on his shoulders and held her hips and, skating backwards, gently guided her while she breathlessly cursed in Hebrew.

But work demanded more and more, and Sarit wasn't used to boredom. Life slowly calcified, and before long a staid routine had been carved out. At home they sat and stared: during dinner, at each other; afterwards, at the television; in bed, away from each other. There were no more flowers in the apartment; Baby stopped bringing them and Sarit stopped caring—perhaps in that order, perhaps in the reverse. When they made love, which was less and less frequently, Sarit rarely purred.

Baby proposed because he didn't know what else to do, and Sarit said yes because neither did she. They got married, inherited a dining room set, bought a condo, then a house, all because it seemed sensible, prudent, logical. Years went by like this.

The business grew steadily under Baby, who was as surprised as anyone that he seemed to have a knack for it. Baby gently retired the lumbering geriatric staff, including his father, and replaced them with young, hungry, creative types who immediately refreshed the look and feel and character of the store. Baby chased and secured a contract with a local wedding hall, opened a second store, then a third, launched the city's first flower delivery business, then began supplying flowers to a large hotel and entertainment company. Before long he found himself with a large and profitable business. Baby, not knowing what else to do with his money, bought himself a sharp-edged sports car and bespoke suits. He was now barely speaking to Sarit, who spent the mornings wondering if she should have a baby and the afternoons with Baby's father, who worked half-days and thought that she should. The two of them would sit at her kitchen table with cooling teas and a plate of peeled mandarins, and he would reminisce—sometimes about his late wife, but mostly about his former life as a violinist. He spoke about the symphony and the adulation and respect he once had and so missed, and she would listen and, when called for, reach over and pat his hand. Sometimes, though very rarely, Baby would join them.

One day Baby came home and from the doorway, overcoat and fedora unremoved and briefcase still in hand, found this scene: Sarit at the kitchen table, resting her sideways head on an open palm, crying soundlessly while she watched her father-in-law play the violin. Baby listened for a solid minute, frozen. He didn't step towards the kitchen or close the door behind him. Baby had never seen his father play the violin—he had no idea that his father even owned a violin—and at that moment he desperately needed to feel needed.

Neither Sarit nor Andrush noticed Baby enter; nor did they notice when he turned around and walked out the open door. Then Baby called a prostitute. She didn't say her name, what time, how much, or any other details other than where her apartment was. Baby was there in less than ten minutes. He felt like a betrayed god and obeyed no traffic signals.

The prostitute's name was Eva, or so she said. Eva's beauty was striking: sharp cheekbones, black marble eyes, and full lips that never fully closed.

She was well into her forties and not at all apologetic. She wore no makeup, and her loose brown hair was streaked with grey. One of her incisors was discolored.

They didn't touch each other on that first visit, but merely passed a bottle of Canadian Club back and forth. Baby talked on and off and kept forgetting where he was; Eva reminded him by biting his pinky, and then he'd be quiet for a while. He didn't ask her any questions. He wanted her, and by extension him, to exist only right then and right there in her overdecorated living room and neither a minute nor an inch beyond.

When Baby got home Sarit asked, without any real interest, where he had been. Baby didn't answer. He held Sarit and asked her to sing for him, which she did. They sat on the floor, and Sarit whisper-sang Nina Simone in his ear while Baby quietly cried. Then they made love like they used to, with rhythm, without the burden of obligation. When Sarit purred, Baby laughed for the first time in months. They fell asleep in each other's arms.

But in the morning it was as if nothing had happened, and Baby and Sarit resumed simply bearing each other. Baby began visiting Eva once a month, then weekly, then twice weekly, then thrice. He grew addicted. The sex was thrilling in a way Baby hadn't thought possible. It was the kind of sex that inspires regrets and promises, but Eva would not let Baby love her, even though she stopped demanding her fee. (Baby still paid.) They kept the intimacy strictly physical and spoke only of books and flowers.

Baby and Sarit's relationship quietly deteriorated until it was so fragile that neither dared test it. Then, one night, during a fight about nothing and everything, Sarit revealed that she had known about Eva for months and, aiming to inflict as much emotional damage as possible, said that it did not bother her. Baby turned and walked to the bedroom. He packed a small bag and drove to Eva, who refused his offer, then to the airport. He tried calling Sarit from the terminal, but she wouldn't pick up and he didn't leave a message.

When Baby arrived in Budapest he considered looking the first Eva up. He wondered what had happened to her and imagined that she was a glamorous actress alone in bed or in her dressing room, remembering that funny Canadian and that night, the rain, those kisses, wondering where Baby was and if he'd ever come back. He imagined this and realized that he preferred the image over the likely reality. He did not pursue it any further.

Instead, he visited Gabor, who didn't seem surprised to see him. Gabor told him to put his bags down—they were going out. Gabor was now an old man with a stoop and a cane. His reputation as a past poet of some note was secure, so he no longer had to write, rewrite, or even pretend to write. He simply sat at the same bar every night and drank, and Baby joined him for a while, trading poems and reminiscing about memories they didn't share.

Baby eventually left Budapest, and for a long time he refused life and travelled. Every month he sent Sarit a postcard with more or less written on it. She never wrote back because she couldn't—she never knew exactly where he was or how long he would be there. He wrote from Auckland, on a postcard with a panorama of barnacled white fishing boats, *I had to leave*, which was the closest he ever came to an apology or explanation. He wrote from Paris, on a postcard with a French man posing in front of the Eiffel Tower, a long missive about boredom and its ill effects. It began: *When moments cease being discrete, experience and meaning can find no foothold*. The last postcard he wrote was from the Sinai desert. He had given it to me to mail, but I never did. It depicted a palm tree at an impossible angle, nearly horizontal, cutting across a white beach. He wrote a short impersonal letter to Sarit on the front and signed off with *baby zango walks*.

At Sinai there were no hotels, but only clusters of grass huts that sprang up like giant mushrooms staffed by patient, lazy Arabs. A dollar would get you lodging for the night plus lunch prepared by a fat Arab, who would then try and sell you unfiltered hash with unsmokeable pebble-like clumps in it. To get to the next cluster of huts, which was not more than a few kilometres down the coast, you had to hire a camel and driver. (Walking could literally kill you.) There was little to do except watch the desert or the sea during the day and the stars or the thick blackness beneath them at night. Baby was the only person there without companions, aside from me. I had broken up with my boyfriend somewhere in the Turkish countryside. He had wanted to bring a local girl into our bed, and I refused. We fought in front of the girl, first in whispers then in gulping shouts. She stood there and listened with an infuriating patience, although I don't even know if she understood English. At daybreak my boyfriend took his knapsack and went off with the girl, whose name I never learned. I went to Sinai because it most resembled nowhere.

The entirety of the camp consisted of a group of Israelis, several couples from wherever (Denmark, Argentina, New Zealand), a family of Swedes who

did not wear clothing, and Baby and me. Baby and I met when the fat Arab seated us together for lunch, which was impossible to eat alone—the portions were arranged on desk-sized platters, mounds of egg-stew spilling into chopped olives and tomatoes, all blanketed by fresh laffa.

On my first day in Sinai, after lunch, Baby sat on the beach and I joined him. It was probably hours before we spoke. It wasn't awkward—the desert allows a sort of instant camaraderie, even intimacy. We sat on the shore, looking at the same setting sun. There were no sidelong glances, false coughs, or chatter about the weather or where we were from. It just felt like two souls alone, together. Eventually Baby turned to me, introduced himself, and said, *Would you care to take a walk and talk and figure out why we're here?* And that's what we did, for days and days, though he did most of the talking. At night we'd part and sleep in separate huts. I'd lie awake, listening to the sounds of the desert and thinking about everything Baby had told me. I think I fell in love with Baby, or at least with his story.

On the day he finished his story, when the sun had almost completely sunk into the purple horizon, Baby kissed me and walked into the sea. He stopped when the water reached his waist, but only for a moment.