

Have You Seen Grandpa Lately?

Tovit Neizer

To my grandfather Natan and Uncle Israel,

who each taught me

something about people.

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Part One

Chapter One

Passover Eve, 2019-5779

Families walked to their cars in their holiday fineries. Silence rose from the side streets of Tel Aviv, and a lone citrus tree gave off a gentle scent of bloom.

“Tell me, how can you live in this city?” Shmulik’s nasal tone woke Yoni from thoughts about his grandfather. “I swear, I don’t get you. What’s the appeal? The buildings are all old... look! You probably pay as much as I pay for my house’s mortgage for that dilapidated fifty square meters I just saw.”

“Sixty meters,” Yoni corrected. “I’m looking for something new right now. They’re raising my rent by twenty-five hundred shekels. Landlady’s grandson is planning on tearing down the whole building, and he’s pressuring everyone into leaving, to speed things up.”

“You’re searching again?! I don’t understand what you see in this city. Either the buildings are falling apart, or they’re being torn down to build a high-rise.”

“Hey, look, tell Michal to ask Mom for the exact address.” Yoni pulled the key out of the motorcycle.

“You don’t remember where your grandfather lives?”

“Just ask.”

The surrounding buildings suddenly managed to disorient him. Some of them had been renovated, having grown taller and stretched to the sides over the years, their balconies ample with vegetation.

The last time he’d visited the apartment was some years ago, when his grandfather got his Filipino caretaker and Yoni’s mother asked him to go over there to make sure the two were getting along. His grandfather was anxious and detached, the caretaker sat in her room, silent and alert. His mother was on a long trip, and he didn’t want to worry her. On a short call with

poor reception, he calmed her down and said that the two were perfectly fine, which sealed the matter for all parties involved.

Shmulik's voice snapped him away from his reminiscence.

"Here, she's answered. *43 Rashi, apartment 5. No intercom or lock.* Well, isn't that great? And then you all wonder where he is and why he won't answer. A lot can happen in a building where you can simply walk into without making any effort or punching any codes in. Just don't be surprised afterwards."

Yoni half-listened to his brother-in-law talk as he tried to remove a pamphlet stuck to the sole of his flip-flop. A young woman looked over at him with seductive eyes.

"He won't answer my mom, Shmulik. I haven't spoken with him in a long time. Just '*hi, how are you*' at holiday dinners."

"You do realize that we're about to be greeted by a corpse?" Shmulik grabbed his head, surprised every time anew to find that his hair was no longer there.

"We'll go in with the key, find whatever we find, and get out," Yoni said matter-of-factly, rummaging through the front and back pockets of his jeans. The metallic rattle of keychain colliding with the change in his pocket as if threatened to disturb the building's slumber. His broad shoulders slacked downward as though melting, bearing the burden of his family. And this was before he even got to the crowded dinner, set to start in an hour. 'How's work?' 'What about the promotion?' 'Where do you see yourself in a few years' time?' His father had pressured him into studying economics like it was some guarantee. "You have to understand, you're not supposed to work at a carpentry shop at thirty years old," he repeated. Finally, thanks to friends from his reserve, Yoni got into an investment firm. He'd come in every morning and sit down in front of his computer, staring at his reflection on the darkened monitor for several long seconds before waking up both himself and his device.

Twice a year he had to come to the family dinner. The rest of these he easily got out of; his mother let him off the hook. It's not like she had time to pressure him, what with all of her work trips abroad. But she had to have everyone present for Passover and Rosh Hashana.

The brothers-in-law advanced down the street and walked toward the building. The wet, long hair of a girl passing them by on the sidewalk, motorcycle helmet in hand, tugged on Yoni's nose. The citrus-scented shampoo blended with the smell of the tree blooming in the yard. He thought about the empty bottle of shampoo Sigal had left in his apartment. It had been standing there for three weeks. Other girls had entered the shower and exited, and still that bottle stared at him, orphaned.

Yoni trailed the girl with his eyes, trying to make eye contact. Shmulik followed him and wondered how many girls he's slept with in the past month.

"You should've visited him more often," he let slip.

The girl got on her motorcycle, started the motor, and disappeared down the road. Yoni continued to follow her with his gaze.

The building's entry path was dark. Shmulik positioned himself behind Yoni, raised his phone in front of his face, and turned on the flashlight.

"Come on! What, you need a floodlight now? Seriously?" Yoni pushed his hand away.

The rusty front door of the building stood before him, a dark and loosely-connected glass panel at its center.

They scaled the stairs. Yoni took the lead, the key in his hand. On the door was a wooden sign with the name *Levinger* engraved in sunken lettering.

"Listen, there's a bad vibe," Shmulik almost whispered. "I can smell the mold from over here. How long have you all been waiting? Didn't the Filipino pick up?"

“I have no idea,” Yoni loudly replied. “Mom was at a conference until now, then they went on a cruise. All she told me was to pick him up for the holiday.”

“Exactly! She and Moti were away for like a month! Nobody spoke with him this entire time? What is it with your messed-up family?!”

“Let’s lower the tone. Apart from your clean-cut tribe, most families are messed up. Okay, I’m going in. Might be worth covering your mouth and nose, just to be safe.” To his surprise, the key rotated in the lock with ease.

A thick, sour odor emerged from the apartment.

Yoni stood in the entryway and tried to trace his grandfather with a mission-driven look. A wave of familiar smell suddenly overpowered the packed air, melting away the gossamer of dust over his recollection. He could hear the swift tapping of slippers between the floors during summer break, could see the neighbor kids hiding in the stair room. There he was, sitting on a high stool next to the kitchen counter, the pleasing scent of the swirl-shaped cookies rising from the oven. Here he was, sitting at the kitchenette table while Grandpa was doing his crosswords. Geranium bloomed in the planter behind the dark window at the entrance.

A piece of woodwork he’d made as a child rested on a living room shelf, which Grandma had insisted was a unique gift to be kept and placed on display. He was so glad of this gesture. His mother had never displayed his woodworking or drawings, instead preferring to load the shelves with souvenirs from her trips around the world, carved wooden figurines and dolls in traditional garb.

The grandfather’s heavy coat hung in the hallway. Yoni would always hide in it when Michal searched for him, would always hide candy in every pocket in case it took time until she found him. Grandma, in the meantime, would sit in her chair and read.

People who came to her *shiva* would sit in her chair, and he saw how his grandfather would contract until one night he moved the chair to their bedroom and locked the door.

His grandfather's books, set down in various places around the house, reminded Yoni of the bookcase he was planning on building for him.

Yoni stood in the entryway and pasted together the faded pieces of images from the family's past. A long snuffle from Shmulik brought him back to the present, to the purpose of the visit.

Slowly, the two advanced deeper into the apartment. The dense smell grew stronger. Yoni's flip-flops led him into the bedroom, and Shmulik trudged behind him.

Yoni pushed the wooden door with the frosted glass in the middle.

A horrible scent enveloped the two of them.

They covered their noses. Shmulik began trembling uncontrollably.

Yoni covered his nose as well and stepped toward the bed.

He slowly raised the blanket and found long, dark pajamas in evidently new condition, with a button-up top. The pajamas were neatly folded up.

The closet door was ajar, and he saw the tidied shelves. If only he could enter it and be transported to a simpler place, like in the book he'd loved as a child, away from all the drama raging around him.

"There's nothing here," he said, turning around to find Shmulik bowing down and wrestling with his spasming stomach. Before he could tell what was going on, Shmulik ran to the bathroom and threw up.

A wind came in through the window, launching a trail of gray feathers that had piled up on a broken slat in the shades. Yoni tracked them with his eyes.

On the floor, on the other side of the bed, he noticed the corpses of several dead pigeons.

Chapter Two

Rina hoisted a cloth over the long table. She then glanced at the ornate watch on her left wrist and looked toward the door, wondering when her father would enter. She was suddenly beset by discomfort, and she sent a finger down to her ankles to loosen the leather straps of her new heels. In the summer, when her father and his Filipino came to her birthday party, they seemed almost happy. Perhaps she'd just imagined that? After all, her father had so resented her when she got him the caregiver a few years prior.

"But hang on! You didn't tell us how India was just now!" her cousin, Drora, interrupted her thoughts, dressed in what looked like a wide linen tent.

"That's right!" Rina tried to overcome the voices of the guests embroiled in active conversation in the living room. She pressed her open palm to her chest, a large smile spreading across her face. Her metal bracelets jangled, bedazzled with colorful jewels. She'd bought them there, cheap bracelets for which she paid steep prices fit for a tourist. Recalling the buying experience, she immediately diverted attention away from them, repressing the prolonged argument with the shabby-clothed vendor, an argument that ended only when Moti implored her to move on. "Magical. Simply magical. You've never seen such places, not even in fairytales." Her eyes lit up. "And I'm not talking about the sort of India trip young people do after their military service, or any of that disgusting nonsense." Drora nodded in ardent assent. "I'm talking about a magical culture, fascinating, moving, enlightening... I learned so much there." She remembered one of the yoga classes she organized for the members of the delegation, where they learned how to take deep, flowing breaths. She had been completely in the thrust of the exercises when her cellphone broke the silence, the instructor sending her out, chastising her. Evelyn had remembered to answer her many messages with a curt apology.

“Sorry. Aba ok. Doctor check say ok¹.” That’s all she wrote. Rina had hoped that the caregiver would serve as an information pipeline, a bridge over troubled water connecting her to her father who had never spoken much to begin with, at least not with her. She was very soon disabused of this notion.

“We can learn so much from these Asians,” she went on, “it’s a whole other pace of life, their respect toward people is completely different, and the food! Oh, the food! It’s just... amazing. So colorful, so delicious, so intriguing, all of it, all of it!” She set the plates on the table.

“And are you planning on bringing Indian tourists to Israel?” Drora asked.

“Look,” Rina stopped tidying up the table and looked straight at her cousin, “I have very big plans for the Ministry of Tourism. Every decade they make different plans over there. One time they said they’d bring over a billion Chinese. And a billion Chinese can’t be wrong, right?” Drora was about to open her mouth and was immediately silenced. “No! They aren’t wrong!” Rina declared. “And they did come! But as foreign laborers.” Drora continued in her consistent nod, its rhythm synching up with the Asian cat figurine on one of the shelves in front of her. The cat moved its head and waved its hand hello. “I’m telling you here and now that the Indians would make the right choice coming to the Holy Land.”

“Very nice,” Drora mumbled, immediately silenced once again.

“I prove to all the young girls at the office that revolutions have no age. By the time I was thirty I’d already managed to establish one of the biggest PR firms this country’s ever seen. So, there you have it. They can go on waiting for me to retire.” Rina looked at her watch again. “Say, how’s your brother? So busy he didn’t get back to me about today. Is he with Tamar’s family?”

“Yes, Yoel is in up to his ears,” Drora replied with a proud tone. “So much stress, so many investigations... we hardly see him.”

Rina was once again surprised that her cousin was still working after everything that had happened, and, what’s more, that he’d moved up the ladder. It went against her common sense.

¹ The caregivers tend to speak to their employers in basic broken Hebrew. Here, it will appear in italic to mark that the broken English represents broken Hebrew. When they speak to each other they converse in Tagalog, which appears in this translation in English.

“He probably didn’t get a chance to get back to me... I left him a message saying he’s invited, of course, but work obviously takes up all his time nowadays, that’s completely understandable. You know, Drora, if I’m being honest, we never thought he’d be so successful in life... and in the police of all places... what with all the nonsense he’d done when we were kids... but, look at that, he’s a roaring success!” her watch once again grabbed her attention. “Are they going to be late every time?” she quietly filtered out just as the doorbell rang.

On the other side of the door were Shoshi, Rina’s childhood neighbor from Tel Aviv, and her husband, Yigal. Every year, the couple made a point of taking a break from their kids and spending the holiday evening with Rina’s family. Shoshi held a bottle of wine in one hand and in her other hand she held her husband’s arm, his face obscured by a large potted sansevieria wrapped in cellophane with a red ribbon.

“Look at you, right on time!” Rina went over to hug her friend. The man rushed to place the potted plant on the floor at the entrance and kissed Rina’s cheeks.

“Granma, when will we get to eat?” Her granddaughter, who had up to that point waited so patiently with her mother in the living room, ran toward her.

“Right away, sweetie, right away.”

“Right away? They haven’t even come back with Grandpa yet,” Michal said.

Rina sent her daughter a piercing gaze, the latter sitting in the living room among the guests, showing no intent to help.

“So nice that everyone’s here,” Shoshi said, and Rina listed those absent in her head.

“Alright, I’m hungry,” Rina’s husband approached her, dragging his feet. “I’m going to eat in the kitchen.”

“Moti, we’re going to wait for everyone and sit down like human beings.”

But some of the men were already following him into the kitchen, where he opened a large pot with soft matza balls floating in it, and he began ladling soup into the bowls. Rina tried to distract herself from the stalling dinner and regarded Shoshi. “Let’s hear it. How are the

grandkids? How's your mother doing?" Rina's thoughts wandered to her own family as the latter started to answer. She'd promised that she'd spend the coming holiday break with her young granddaughter, but the Indian campaign could turn out to be her greatest achievement, and the just-concluded Knesset election increased the tension in the office.

"Moti, I need a new tablecloth. This one doesn't work," she called to her husband, interrupting her friend's talking.

"Why a new one?"

"Just get it!" she commanded and apologized to her friend.

"And what about your mother? How's her Filipino?" she asked, peeling all the dishware off the table.

"Her Filipino is Romanian, but she has to leave soon. Her visa's about to expire, they're sending her back home."

"You didn't want her to stay?"

"We did. But then we understood that she wasn't doing the work well enough."

Rina vigorously nodded as she thought about all the things Evelyn could do at her father's house instead of sitting with him outside for hours on end. Thorough work, cleaning that hasn't been done in years. "And, if that isn't enough, some of Mom's jewelry has disappeared. Not so innocent, these women!"

"You don't say!" Rina quickly fondled her earlobes, hiding her gold earrings.

"Three times a week I'm there. You hear? You hire a Filipino and you have to do all the work yourself. It's absurd!"

Rina went on nodding.

"Really, you don't say..." Drora joined in. "You hear such horror stories about caregivers..." she said, half-looking at Rina, who seemed to have grown slightly pale as she took the new tablecloth from her husband's hands.

“Have you considered a nursing home?” Rina skipped over Drora’s remark, addressing Shoshi as she hoisted the new tablecloth in the air, hoping it would land quickly and as neatly as she’d imagined.

“Yes, that’s what’s going to happen. We’ve started asking around. Look, it’s one hell of a project. There’s a deposit of a million-plus, depending on the class you choose. And you also have to pay a monthly fee, of course.”

“How much per month?” Drora inquired.

“It depends. There’s one apartment with two bedrooms, since the Filipino’s going to need her own room, for fifteen thousand a month, or a smaller apartment for nine thousand and change,” Shoshi replied.

“So have the Filipino sleep in the living room and have it over with! Say, who’s paying for all of that?!” Rina determined, and made a mental note to see if the Social Security money had come in.

“I’m starving, are we going to eat already?” the granddaughter once again asked.

“Mom, look, I’m getting hungry, too,” Michal said. “When are we going to start? It’s like this every year.”

“Talk to your brother. He’s disappeared along with your husband.”

“I’m calling Shmulik!” Michal stepped aside.

“We just started asking around about assisted living for ourselves, too,” Drora interjected. “There’s this franchise, Embrace Life, that we heard from friends about. They have organized marketing tours. They have everything, a pool, too. It’s just very expensive.”

“What, why aren’t you answering?!” Michal stared, wondering, at her phone’s screen.

“Text him,” her daughter suggested.

“I believe we’re going to have to sell the house to do it,” Drora went on, ignoring the goings-on around her, “and tap out our inheritance while we’re still alive. Not everyone helps the kids like you do.”

Michal and Rina exchanged glances.

“Maybe you don’t have to help out the kids,” Moti suddenly came out of the kitchen.

“Oh, there you go with your advice again,” Rina yelled to him. “And where do you suppose Yoni’ll live?”

“Didn’t your parents help you out?!” Michal asked him.

“Well, have you reached him?”

“No, Mom, there’s no service on his end.”

“Your generation is spoiled,” her father determined.

“Our generation isn’t spoiled. I’m building my clinic and I’ve got three kids to raise.”

“You get much more help than I did while I was raising you,” Rina snapped, taking her daughter to task.

Michal was surprised.

“I haven’t asked you for a dime,” she angrily replied to her mother.

“My time has its price, too, Michali.”

“So you’re not coming to watch Shaked during the holiday?”

“Oh, there he is. Yoni’s calling me.” Rina waved the phone in her hand, grateful to be saved by the bell.

“God, I’m starving...” the granddaughter declared again. “Come in already!”

“Mom...” Yoni’s voice sounded faded.

“What’s going on, Yoni’le? Everyone’s here waiting, even Elijah will be knocking any minute. No shortage of parking here.”

Everyone around her went quiet. Time had become a taut fishing line with nothing tugging on its end. “Mom, we can’t find Grandpa.”