

EVANESCENT BLOOM

Ayelet Abraham

EVANESCENT
BLOOM

Cactus Publishing house, Nahariya

This is a work of fiction based on true experience. Names, Characters, places, and incidents were changed or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real.

Cactus House Publihsing
Grinbaum 11
Nahariya, Israel 22407

Copyright © 2012 by Ayelet abraham
Cover Photograph by Suika
Editor: Sorelle Weinstein

ISBN: 978-965-91993-0-3
www.cactus-house.com

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address Cactus House Publishing.

Printed in Israel.

Thus shall ye think of this fleeting world:

A star at dawn,

A bubble in a stream

A flash of lightning in a summer cloud

A flickering lamp

A phantom and a dream.

The Buddha, Diamond cutter of doubt sutra,
section XXXII.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 7

Evanescent Bloom

Chapter 1: Taking the plunge	9
Chapter 2: Passion	20
Chapter 3: Dating Yaniv	26
Chapter 4: Fleeting Existences	32
Chapter 5: Little Social World	36
Chapter 6: The Beautiful and the Brave	38
Chapter 7: Inner Gardens	42
Chapter 8: Monologues Night	53
Chapter 9: Drinking with the “Losers”	56
Chapter 10: The People we Love and Hate	61
Chapter 11: Masculine Sensibilities	65
Chapter 12: Sisterhood	71
Chapter 13: Utopia on the Lawn	76
Chapter 14: The Taste of Truth	82
Chapter 15: The Flow of Love	89
Chapter 16: Faith	92
Chapter 17: Difficult Relations	95
Chapter 18: Catharsis	110

A Monologue: Weaving Emotions - How Theater Actors Learn to Willfully Arouse Emotional States. 114

INTRODUCTION

Evanescent Bloom is a compilation of two pieces written between the years 2005-2008, following the field work I conducted with a group of theater students as part of my PhD studies in cultural anthropology. Throughout the study, I became increasingly interested and intrigued by the anthropology of emotions – at first, I probed into cultural differences in emotional experience and expression, and later on examined how culture influences patterns of emotional self-control.

The field work was a life-changing experience for me, and as my study drew to a close, I found it very difficult to be objective and critically analyze the material I had gathered. I had become intimately connected with the actors, and simply couldn't detach myself and dissect the contents of the field diaries. I needed to keep the organic flow of events and people I had met. My remedy was to fictionalize my experience – which gave me the freedom to open up to my heart's wisdom.

The stories were written as an experiment, my need to explore the thin line between ethnography and fiction and to find a way to speak in my own voice. In the first part, *Evanescent Bloom*, I allowed myself to change names and events; to add some sections and to highlight others that felt significant. It is not a naturalistic depiction of the field. In the concluding short piece, "A Monologue: Weaving Emotions – How Theater Actors Learn to Willfully Arouse Emotional States," I play with combining personal and academic writing.

I would like to thank the theater students and teachers who allowed me to be part of their world. My time spent conducting field work, and later on writing, were made

possible only thanks to the generous funding of Haifa University. I'm deeply indebted to Professor Nurit Bird-David, who has offered me great academic freedom and has always been there for me. To Professor Nigel Rapport who continues to be a wonderful friend and source of inspiration. Profound thanks goes to Eileen who teaches me again and again to listen to my inner voice; to my mother Tamar who read the manuscript enthusiastically; and my children, Ariel and Gideon, who have walked with me along this path. I am deeply grateful to the presence of all these people and many others in my life, and most of all to Shlomo whose tenderness and support have nurtured the completion of this book. Im deeply indebted to Sorelle Weinstein, whos systematic and highly professional editing allow me now to share this story with others.

CHAPTER 1

TAKING THE PLUNGE

Sitting by the murmuring computer, Devine began typing what she had written the day before in her notebook. Deeply absorbed in the rhythmic movement and sound of the clicking keyboard, she forgot for a moment the naked windowless white walls around her and the shelves loaded with heaps of old tests above her head. She had been sitting in this university room for a very long time, or so she felt. It was her second year of PhD, and before that there was the masters, and before that the bachelor's degree all after twelve years of school. It troubled her lately why she had chosen this path, and had not pursued something entirely different. Realizing she was holding her breath, she inhaled the lifeless air-conditioned atmosphere.

Sitting with her back to the door, she didn't notice when Amanda barged in. Amanda was an exuberant woman in her early thirties who, like many other single women, enjoyed an extended youth, not being committed to a husband or children. She was a typical ambitious apprentice of the academic art. Specializing in high-tech politics, she roamed the corridors of the university with zest and agility. Perching herself on Devine's table, she settled herself comfortably, oblivious to Devine's scattered papers all around her.

"What's up?" Amanda asked inquisitively, while staring at the screen trying to figure out what Devine was writing. Devine flinched, not knowing how to stop this invasion. "Nothing really. Just writing a paper," she answered quietly. "Oh!! Really?!" said Amanda, her voice piercing the foul air. "What about?" "About Arab-Jewish relations based on my previous field work," Devine answered, immediately regretting she revealed that. You could never know how

Amanda would use information against you. "Well, good luck," said Amanda with a slight tone of ridicule in her voice. "I had a lousy morning." Devine knew this was going to take a while. Usually Amanda's moaning lasted at least half an hour. Devine smiled faintly and leaned back into her chair. Better just nod my head and think of something else, she thought to herself, letting her mind go astray, thinking of Amir, the boy she met that summer at the New Age Festival. She looked up at Amanda who had just begun to talk about a friend of hers with whom she had quarreled over the Internet. "I'm sorry, I have a class beginning in half an hour. I'm sure tomorrow will be a better day," she said, trying to appease Amanda who clearly had much more to say. Amanda smiled and said, "Well, will I see you later?" "I don't think so, I'm off to a lesson and after that I'm going home" she said while getting up from her chair. "So I'll see you tomorrow!" said Amanda sweetly, finally leaving Devine to enjoy her peaceful solitude.

Devine had gotten used to a solitary life. She could live within her head for days and weeks without talking to anyone. Walking down the long corridor with its gray walls and row of office doors, which were mostly closed, she felt like she was walking by a dormant animal that every once in a while opened one of its eyes. There was the silent language of doors. A closed door communicated: "No one here or I want privacy to work." A slightly closed door meant: "I'm in, but I'm working, so don't bother me." And a wide open door signified: "I'm available for conversation."

On her left was the secretary's office, a major center of power and information. The secretary, Sara, was a well-preserved woman in her late forties, reserved and watchful of everything that happened in the Anthropology department, while also keeping in close contact with secretaries from other departments on the in and outs of everyone above bachelor's degree. It was very dangerous to become an object of her scrutiny, as her main instrument

of influence was spreading waves of rumors and gossip that could reach the highest levels of the university.

Devine, tucking her dark blond hair behind her ear, sneaked past that door and waited for the elevator. A large group of students approached, many of them bachelor degree students, which was apparent by their relatively young age and ethnicity. The majority of students at that university were Arabs and Eastern European new immigrants. They shuffled into the elevator, taking care not to touch one another when entering, squeezing in until the buzz of overweight stopped the loading of flesh. Devine, pushing herself in at the last moment, was pressed up against the large mirror, battling the building claustrophobia inside her. As the elevator reached the bottom floor and the doors opened to a multitude of waiting eyes, she fought her way out.

Walking out on to the cement path, she could sense the excitement building up inside her. She was on her way to begin field work with a group of theater students with whom she planned to explore emotional experience and expression. The central argument in the anthropology of emotions, which was her field of research, is that emotions are a cultural construct like all other cultural phenomena. Her plan was to explore emotional diversity along national, gender, and religious affiliation, trying to describe the subtle differences and similarities among the students. She had studied theater before, and knew that emotions are a central subject matter in actor training. The training studio was a laboratory where emotions and their expression were explored, and so she decided to join a group of theater students on their first year.

As she reached the theater studio, she entered hesitantly. It was dark and spacious, full of promise. A beam of light flowed from a single spotlight on the ceiling, creating a bright, empty circle at the center of the room. On one side there were four levels of wooden platforms and a few students sitting on the bottom one. Seating herself at the

far end, she observed with timid curiosity the people who were chatting among themselves. They were discussing the many hours of study they had that day, mostly academic courses. Alarming Devine, they suddenly turned towards her and smiled.

“Hi. Will you be studying with us?” they asked amiably. “Yes, I’m going to be doing field work with you.” “Wow!” they responded excitedly, “that sounds cool.” “What are you studying?” asked one of the girls, pale and tall. “Anthropology. And my name is Devine,” she smiled. “I’m Miriam,” said the tall one. “And I’m Dana,” answered the second girl, short and plump. “And my name is David but people call me ‘the Dud,’” answered the boy, who was wearing a velvet hat over his long wavy hair.

Leon, the teacher, entered the room as a great predator moves in midday through the bush. Large and heavy, he was a man in his late fifties, with a big mane of white hair and the features of a turbulent soul. “Stop immediately everything you are doing and sit down so we can begin,” he commanded, his deep voice echoing from the walls, followed by the immediate silence of the students. They gathered around him in a full circle. Devine observed that it was a mixed group of Arabs and Jews.

“I know this is a long day for you, but I demand that you sit quietly in your chairs when I enter the room. I am not going to waste time forcing you to work. It’s not the job I’m here for,” he said, sitting down heavily in front of them. “We are here to become actors. Actors are people who work frantically day and night. They are a suicidal kind of people who jump off walls without knowing what kind of landing they will have. If you can’t do that and you wait to understand first, you will get nowhere.

“But that does not mean you should act only spontaneously. Acting is a profession just like carpentry. It has tools and methods. If you think you’re going to become an actor just because you’re ‘talented,’ you are wrong. ‘Intuitive’ actors suck because they have no control

over what they do and sooner or later they start to repeat themselves.

“Our first exercise will be telling a story. Each one of you has three minutes to tell us a story that will move our hearts. There are several tools to achieve that: the story begins all of a sudden, cutting directly to the core of the drama, it has a beginning, a climax, and an end, and it has to be both personal and universal. And finally, please maintain eye contact with the audience,” he said, looking at the students as if he was inviting them to a fight of wits and power. Devine found herself feeling a sense of awe towards him. The thought of having to stand in front of him and the group terrified her. “So, who’s going for it?” Leo roared, reminding Devine of a football coach. “If you want to become a part of this profession, you better start running around like terrified rabbits.”

Daria, a large beast with long legs and sharp cheekbones, wearing designer clothes which exposed her sleek abdomen, positioned herself before the class. She was confident as only a Jewish Ashkenazi upper class girl could be. Her long legs spread apart, she leaned forward on the chair in a military style, gazing straight into the eyes of the students. “Two years ago my friend Diana came to visit me from Tel-Aviv. When I say a friend, I mean someone who has shared with me the darkest times. She was with me when all I wanted was to die. It was a glorious Saturday and we went to the beach to eat lunch. As we were thinking where to go, she suggested Frank’s. The place was crowded and we had to wait, which she hated. She wanted to leave, but I didn’t have the energy to carry on looking for other places, so we waited and finally got a table by a window facing the sea. We ordered some hummus and meat that we both liked. It was all so wonderful, just the two of us. We were eating and drinking beer, chatting about our lives, until finally we asked for the bill. I got up and went to the bathroom, and then, when I was standing by the sink suddenly....” She paused, her voice soaked with fear, her

hand raised in disbelief. “I heard this noise that cannot be described and a huge force, like an invisible hand, hurled me against the wall. I was confused at first, only hearing my heart thumping, as a petrified gazelle in her flight through the woods. Unsteady, I walked into the restaurant’s hall. The first thing I saw when I got out there was just a blend of colors, everything smeared and blurry. I kept saying to myself, ‘This isn’t true. This isn’t true. It’s just a dream,’ when I suddenly remembered. Diana. I moved in the direction of our table, passing all kinds of bloody matter, pieces of people. Diana was still sitting on her chair, but her head was flanged backwards and blood trickled out of her mouth and from every opening in her head. Her bathing suit was torn to shreds, her breasts exposed and bleeding. I couldn’t take my eyes off her. I think that her hair was burnt to the scalp. I could only feel my heart going boom, boom. I couldn’t grasp that it was her sitting there, her eyes wide open....”

Daria paused, the room frozen with suspense. “Everything moved in slow motion. The next thing I remember was that someone grabbed me. I recognized the guy; he was in elementary school with me. He said something and pulled me away forcibly. They took me in an ambulance to the hospital and my parents came looking for me. I still can’t believe she’s gone. I loved her so much.” She ended her story.

“Wow, that’s a hot story,” said Yaniv, a stout-looking boy with great satisfaction. David asked for permission to talk. “You had it all, the sights, the sounds, the sensations. I was deeply moved,” he said in deep admiration. The whole group agreed that it was a powerful story. Devine was speechless, crying and writing throughout the whole session. She was so scared during the wave of suicide bombings that she didn’t listen or watch television for two years, and here she was hearing this horrific story. She felt sick, a convulsion pushing its way from the bottom of her stomach. She felt such deep sympathy for Daria who had

lost such a dear friend. “Yes, that was a well-told story – personal and universal, full of sensory details. Well done,” said Leon.

“Okay. We have time for one more story before we finish for the night. Who’s jumping on to this scary chair?” he called. Salam, who was a Druze, with pale blue eyes that suggested ancient Aegean origins, volunteered to perform. He sat on the chair, throwing his long legs in front of him, tucking his hands in his armpits. “My mother was making lunch when they came to tell her of my father’s death. There was a fight in the village and one of my uncles killed my father with a shotgun. My mother was crushed. When she and my father married they did not see one another before the ceremony and my mother fell deeply in love with my father only after marriage. When he died, she was pregnant with me and already raising an eight-month-old baby girl that could barely crawl.

“No one understood why it had happened. When I opened my eyes to this world, twenty-four days after that, moving from one incarnation to another, I entered a world which was in utter chaos. My mother had a nervous breakdown and they feared we would become mentally ill as well. I grew up surrounded by people who never ceased to mourn. They did not talk about what had happened, but would sit long hours on the couch in the living room, absorbed in their memories and pain. Growing up in that family, much sorrow and sadness have been my share.” He concluded, closing his mouth firmly, his tongue pushing against his cheek the only sign of his inner turmoil.

“Round of applause for Salam, everybody,” called Leon with enthusiasm. After the clamor of applause ceased, Dalia, a skinny girl with raven black hair and an intense pair of blue eyes, raised her hand. “I could sense a tremble in Salam’s voice that showed that he was emotionally involved in his story,” she said with great conviction. “Yes,” another girl, Anat, called out in a sugary voice. “It was different and fascinating. The story was so beautiful,”

she said. “The story was very authentic. It fit into what I think about the Druze in the village,” said Yaniv in the coarse voice of a heavy smoker.

“I appreciate your courage to take us to where you have,” said Leon. “I suggest next time you write down and plan how you tell the story. That will allow you more freedom to breathe and overcome the fear.” He paused, then continued. “Your eye contact and the way you sat aroused my emotions. Yet, your voice was monotonous. If you would have explored for more variants in your voice, such as screams of pain, you could have expressed more emotions. We don’t have the right to psychoanalyze what you do. We will always focus only on how to use ourselves as the musical instruments that we are – our body, soul, and personal history. We shall learn to play this instrument effectively, with consciousness and control. What differentiates an actor from a madman is that a madman has lost control. Imagine a violin player who during a concert throws his bow by mistake. You do find actors that become so excited they begin to spit. Yes, they spit on the other actor.” The group was giggling as he demonstrated the spitting actor while talking. “Well, we shall never lose control. And here is the difficulty – how do we express an authentic emotion while sustaining control?” The class was completely silent.

“Is it even possible to control our sadness?” asked Yaniv. Leon turned around to see who spoke. “You can control everything,” he said sharply. “And you better remember it’s all an illusion. You will create for me an illusion with your actions. If you think that you are really Othello, then you will actually choke Desdemona, as happened a few years ago at the city’s theater. An actress filed a complaint at the police because she was choked by the actor performing Othello.”

“Oh, yes,” called Sofia, from the back. Sofia was a clever-looking girl with round spectacles and a Russian accent. “I heard it was because of a personal dispute among them

outside the stage.” The class sniggered.

“You must come to such control that on a cue you will be able to make the audience burst into tears,” continued Leon, “but once the show is over, the actor goes home as if nothing had happened. If we are totally submerged in what we do and are not able to detach ourselves from our character, we might lose our minds. We have to be like a violin player who comes to the orchestra looking like any other man on the street, while during the concert he fascinates the audience with virtuosity. After the concert, he puts the instrument back in the box and goes to have tea. That’s the way art is. To reach that point we must be courageous, daring, but always in control. Theater demands the surrender of our entire soul at a given moment.”

His fluent speech was intoxicating, filling the hearts of the students with an intense passion to become the best actors, like superhumans who can control their emotions not only on stage, but everywhere. They would become powerful beings who control their own personal turmoil while knowing exactly how to arouse in others feelings of love, passion, anger, sadness, all the different versatile kinds of emotions one can just create. This was magic. “Thank you and goodnight all, I’m finished for today,” he said, getting up heavily and exiting the room.

On her way out, Devine approached Daria shyly. Daria intimidated her with her cold detached appearance. “Excuse me Daria,” she said faintly. Daria, in the middle of smoking her Marlboro Light with Sabila, turned her head. “Yes?” she said. “I felt sympathy for the story you told. I was very sad to hear you have lost your friend,” whispered Devine gravely.

“Oh, I can’t talk about it,” said Daria, suppressing a smile until she couldn’t contain herself anymore and burst into laughter. “It’s all made up. She’s alive, thank god. Just the thought of something happening to her makes me cry.” “I hate these stories,” muttered Rachel, “They make

me want to puke.”

Devine pulled away from the girls and walked outside towards her car. She felt deceived. The coldness of Daria’s lie was frightening. But at the same time, she realized that her story was based on a true event – a terrorist attack had happened in that same restaurant a couple of years before and that it had captured the genuine terror haunting Israeli society. In a sense, although Daria had made it up, she was also convinced of it at the moment of telling it. Devine remembered what she was taught in her own bachelor degree in Theater: theater is based on “the suspension of disbelief” within the stage performance time. Both the actors and the audience participate in a common illusion which they agree to believe for the duration of the performance. The craftsmanship of the art is to create the illusion that would allow for this magic of belief to happen.

As she made her way towards her car, Yaniv, the rough-looking boy, approached her. “Hi! Can you give me a ride home?” he asked. “Where do you live?” she asked unhappy about his request. “Downtown,” he said cheerfully. “Fine, get in the car.” Devine was tired, and just wanted to be left alone. But Yaniv had different plans. “So, what’s your name?” he asked inquisitively as they drove off. “Devine,” she answered quietly. “Wow, that’s a name. My name is Yaniv. I sure am happy to see that I’m not the only old geezer in this class. They are all in their early twenties, and I’m twenty-nine. How old are you?” he asked. “I’m thirty-three. I’m a PhD student doing research about the emotional lives of Israelis,” she answered briskly. “You don’t say. Why, I have a lot of things I can tell you about that. The basic thing is that you must put in your work a large chapter on nerves, yeah, nerves and fear. Cause the state of things in this country is really bad, worse than what people tend to think. People are suppressing huge amounts of fear and nerves and it comes out in all kinds of weird ways, man, I tell you, on the road, in the high

level of divorce. People are treading all over one another, doing bad stuff to one another. I am scared shit to walk in the street sometimes,” he said, with great enthusiasm, spitting at her blindly, all to express the gravity of his words.

She looked at him in wonder. He was an interesting specimen indeed. As she followed his directions they reached a rundown apartment building not far from the highway. No-mans land. “You want to come in for a coffee?” he suggested, smiling. “No, no thanks. Some other time. Good night.” She said driving off, glad to be on her own at last. The dark road and the steering wheel, sleek under her hands, were soothing. The effortless movement forward felt good. She was excited about all the things she had heard and seen that day. She felt like she had entered a different dimension where things happen intensively and alive. Emotions were not as blurred and as muffled as they were in everyday life.

CHAPTER 2

PASSION

Sylvia, the acting teacher, was attempting to begin class. The year had begun three weeks earlier, and her twenty-seven students - far too many in one group, as far as she was concerned - were not doing well. Seven students did not show up, another two were late, and one girl was feeling sick and brooding on the podium.

Sylvia stood in front of the class, her small white face appearing in stark contrast to her black clothes. Her fierce eyes and short haircut gave her an air of cold superiority. She was about to lose her temper. She didn't have any patience for provincial kids who were more interested in whiling away their time at the local pub. Her mood was exacerbated by the pounding headache that had stubbornly stayed with her since she opened her eyes that morning. Looking at her students with a critical gaze, she finally spoke.

"I am not willing to play kindergarten teacher. In this room, I expect self-discipline and concentration at all times. If you cannot manage this, you don't belong here," she said matter-of-factly. "The production office manager, Orli, will come in later to inform you about production regulations. You must all work and assist in the construction and production of three productions this year."

"Now, I want you bunch of lazy nitwits to get up, and split into groups, then choose a topic for a sentence which will be composed of five different movements." The students, already intimidated before they had begun, hurried to find a group. Devine, who had a tendency to feel unwanted, was relieved when she was asked to join a group of two boys and three girls. The group argued for a while about a choice of topic until Sigal, a short girl with

a wild mane of brown hair and a large synthetic flower decorating her deep cleavage, suggested they focus on death. The rest of the group didn't agree, so finally they settled on Passion.

Devine suggested they chase one another. Billy, a dark and handsome boy, disapproved and peered over at what the other groups were doing. He was constantly criticizing them until finally he just stood and watched the girls arguing loudly. Salam opened conversation with him and they started to seduce one another playfully. Meanwhile Sigal performed for the girls her perception of passion by posing like a cover girl, suggestively caressing her breasts and thighs. Sabila disagreed. "There's a world of difference between passion and sexuality," she said decisively. She suggested that their movement exercise would involve everyone wanting Devine, while she rejected them all. "Listen Devine, all you have to do is two movements: place your hands behind your back, and kick the air. These movements are your only means of communication," said Sabila. Devine, feeling honored to be the center of attention, agreed.

When it was finally their turn to perform, Devine became very nervous, afraid she would get it all wrong. She stood in the middle of the room, and once the signal was given for the exercise to begin, the group began motioning at her wildly with the chosen movements, approaching her with loud screams and grunts. One of the girls pulled at her shirt violently. Another reached out to grab her hair. Truly terrified by the intensity of the exercise, Devine ran around the studio while the others chased her. Sylvia stopped the exercise. "What was that?" she asked humorously. They all laughed embarrassedly. "Passion," said Sabila. "You could have fooled me. Looked more like a war or a rape," called Jon, a sensitive-looking boy from the upper platform.

After the students returned to their places, Orli the production office manager, entered the studio and

interrupted the exercises to talk about production regulations. Although she had gentle physical features, she emanated authority. She sounded more like an army officer than an office manager, as she drilled them with class protocol. "You are not aloud to eat or drink on stage. You must not be late. If you are 15 minutes late, I will issue a warning letter, and if you ignore the warning, you will be sent home. I am not your buddy, so don't mess with me. Do you understand?" After the students nodded their heads in assent, Orli looked over at Sylvia, then stomped out of the room with her heavy leather boots.

"Would you like to grab a coffee after class?" Sigal whispered to Devine as they sat on the podium watching another group. "Sure, why not." Devine could do with a new friend. "That passion exercise was really violent," Devine said as she sat on the balcony in the cafeteria, overlooking the park. "Well, it's not too far from the truth. I often feel that way in my relationships with men," said Sigal.

They smiled at each other knowingly. "You're really brave to be studying acting at your age," threw Sigal into the air.

"I'm not. I'm doing field work."

"Wow, I would have never guessed," said Sigal in surprise. "Did you study acting before?"

"Yes, years ago, when I was seventeen. I loved it."

"So why did you quit?" asked Sigal, bewildered.

Devine was embarrassed. "I don't know. Life just led me in another direction. I went to university, became interested in new subjects, got married, had children..." She lost balance. She wasn't prepared for that question. She had often experienced remorse for abandoning her acting career, but there was no going back now.

"That's a pity," said Sigal. "Cause you started early. Age is very important. I'm really scared I'll miss the boat with my acting. I plan to move to the United States in the summer and make it big in Hollywood. I know I can do

it.” Devine listened quietly. “Great,” she said with barely concealed envy. Sigal actually stood a chance.

Before Sigal had a chance to go on, Shlomit walked over to their table and sat down. “Hi. Wow, that was quite a scene you guys made today. I was shocked,” Shlomit said with a smile.

“Where are you from?” asked Devine abruptly, eager to change the subject. “I’m from Rosh Pina,” Shlomit answered. “I’ve only been in this town a year. My boyfriend is studying here, so I decided to join him.” Shlomit was a tall and slender blond. Her sleek hair was neatly parted, and every so often, she pulled a comb out of her bag. “I’m a reserve duty officer in the Army,” she continued, only to arouse expressions of surprise from Devine and Sigal.

“You don’t look like an army officer,” said Sigal. Shlomit smiled back at her, clearly amused. “Well, I guess you’ll just have to get to know me,” she laughed assuredly. “I just can’t imagine you in charge of soldiers.”

“Well,” Shlomit answered with a laugh, “sometimes it’s hard. I remember many times when I stood in front of my soldiers, trying to keep a straight expression on my face, and stop myself from bursting out laughing. “So why are you studying theater?” asked Sigal inquisitively.

“Ever since I was a child, I always found the theater to be thrilling. I dreamed of one day becoming a director. I suppose it’s not too different from being a commander... only more artistic...”

“I didn’t do the army,” Devine suddenly felt the need to confess. “I couldn’t stand the thought of wasting my precious time sitting in a cold office, stamping papers and making coffee.” The two girls looked at her shocked. Only slackers didn’t do the army. “So, how did you get out of it?” they asked.

“I got a letter from a psychologist recommending against the army, and I had to convince a committee of five people that I was too emotionally unstable to be in the

army.” Devine regretted her words the moment they left her lips. It was a common perception amongst Israelis that those who opted out of army duty were either cowardly or weird. She could read the expressions of ambivalence on their faces, as they processed this information. Sigal broke the silence. “Cool.” There was silence at the table after that.

As if on cue, Anat, a passionate brunette from the theater group, walked over to their table and broke the silence. “I feel rotten,” Anat announced as she pulled a chair to join them. “I think I have the flu.” They all looked over at her. Shlomit said, “Well you better go home and get yourself some soup...Oh, that reminds me...My boyfriend just made the most amazing soup today. I can’t wait to get home.” “Oh,” said Anat, masking her jealousy under the heavy cloak of her sugary-sweet voice. “Your boyfriend sounds perfect.”

Shlomit and Sigal got up to leave and as she did so, Anat started to talk. “We are so fragmented as a group.”

“What do you mean?” Devine probed.

Anat, happy to have an audience, offered the following observation. “Well, there are the ‘cool’ ones, that is us, who care more about being creative than getting the highest grades. Then there are the ‘Bunnies’, the girls who constantly look like they’re about to go clubbing. Don’t get me wrong, they’re very nice,” Anat said in a patronizing tone of voice, “but they’re just looking for the glamor of Hollywood. And then there are the serious ones, you know like Sabila and Daria. You also have the Arabs that are dispersed among all the groups, and I’m really happy they are integrating so well, because I was worried they wouldn’t.”

Devine nodded. She understood the divisions Anat just described. Her observations led her to a similar conclusion. The groups were still evolving – everyone was busy trying to find their place, warily sizing each other up. She too felt insecure and uncertain within the group, aware that there

were some dominant and intimidating personalities in the class. Devine found Anat's presumption that they would "integrate" as a group interesting. Many Jewish Israelis were preoccupied with the concept of "Gibush" (integration) among themselves.

Devine did not agree, however, with Anat's assessment of the Arabs' smooth integration within the group. They certainly didn't mesh into all the groups in class. Even amongst themselves, they were divided into subgroups, according to religion and residency. The two rural Muslims would spend most of their time together while the two urban Christians socialized during classes with one another and with the Jews. Salaam, as a Druze, roamed freely wherever he liked; he felt equally comfortable with Jews and Arabs. In Israeli society, Druze are allowed to do army service, and as such are considered to be legitimate members of society, while as Arabic speakers, they share some common cultural characteristics with the Arab society. And, yes, Devine suddenly remembered Valentino, a Christian, who seemed to be slightly lost, sitting most of the time alone at the edge of the group.

As the girls parted ways, Devine headed in the direction of her meeting. As she walked across the cemented path, she met Maher and Abed, the Muslim students. "What's up?" Maher asked. "Great, are you getting on the elevator?" she asked as they stood by the sliding doors. Abed and Maher entered, making jokes about safety procedures against terrorist attacks. The elevator buzzed its signal indicating that the it exceeded the weight allowed, and they got off. Abed, his shrewd eyes peeking from his round face called after her in the sweet voice of a security airport girl. "Has anyone given you something to carry with you?" Devine laughed heartily. "A biological weapon," he yelled and farted noisily as they disappeared behind the closing doors.

CHAPTER 3

DATING YANIV

As the days turned into weeks, the group gradually fell into a working routine. A major source of excitement was the preparations for the first monologues evening which was to take place in front of an audience of family and friends. The monologues evening was a competition between the students over who performed the best monologue, each time from a different culture, such as American, British, French, and Russian plays. The order of monologues was decided by drawing numbers from a hat: Devine got the number 13. She was terrified of performing. Leon, experienced with the fears of first-year students, tried to calm them.

“It’s only a monologues evening. There are several possibilities – you may win the first prize or you could be so excited and nervous, you may forget your lines. Even if you do forget them, so what? Nothing will happen to you.” But Leon’s reassurances did nothing to quell their fear.

Yaniv, excited about the monologues, told Devine on their way home in the car that he was going to deal with the death of his mother two years ago by playing Tom from the “Glass Beehive,” who, in one scene, lashes out at his mother. Yaniv was obsessed with his mother’s death. Wide-eyed and intense, smoking one cigarette after another, he told her about their painful relationship. On her death-bed she accused him of causing her sickness with his unruly behavior. Yaniv believed he was a sinner. He would dabble with drugs, only to be wracked with guilt afterward.

Toni turned up for class the following day limping. Apparently, he had been in a car accident. Toni, a soft-hearted Christian and communist, lost his father when he was still a child. Consequently, he had to work from an early age in order to support his mother and two younger brothers. He always came tired to classes, and now with the pain, it was all too much for him. He sat on the lower podium just before class with a worried expression on his face. University bureaucracy was beyond his understanding.

Devine wished she could help him. "I hate all these movement classes. I wish they would leave me alone," he moaned while trying to move his painful neck. "That hurts so much. I can't take this," he said miserably.

"You'll be fine, don't worry. It's just a matter of time before you get better," said Devine, feeling a sudden urge to hug him.

Abed and Maher entered the studio in a loud commotion, speaking in Arabic. David, the creative and easy-going "dude," called out: "Don't speak Arabic here, this is a Hebrew-speaking acting class. This is the language we speak here!" The two didn't answer back; they stopped talking. It seemed as though everything went on as usual as far as the Jewish students were concerned, but Maher and Abed were feeling increasingly alienated from the group.

Just before the lesson was about to begin, Yaniv approached Devine. "Would you like to join me for dinner at my friend's house?" he asked casually. She hesitated, nervous of getting tangled up romantically with her research "informant." She didn't want their relationship to damage her position within the group. Yaniv was clearly not a "lovable" character, and she was afraid of what people might think if they saw them together. But, on the other hand, this is field work, she convinced herself, and anthropologists have always been known to take a liminal

position in the field, so why not allow things to flow naturally.

So that Friday evening, Devine drove to pick Yaniv up. He didn't answer the phone nor did he open the door when she knocked. She stood for half an hour outside his front door, until he finally appeared, half-drunk. He got into her car reeking of alcohol, and immediately lit a cigarette. Devine was already sorry she had agreed to go out with him. But luckily, once they arrived at Yaniv's friend, she was relieved to meet her, Debbie, a forty-year-old energetic and intelligent woman who was also a single mother raising an autistic child.

Devine and Debbie had a lot in common. They talked about art and archeology, and Debbie described her trip to Turkey that summer with Yaniv. Yaniv turned on the television, and they watched a parody of a South American weatherman bursting with sexuality. "I love comedy," said Yaniv, loudly sipping his third glass of wine. "I think it's the heart of theater. That's why I want to be an actor. I want to make people laugh. It's like tickling them," he said smiling, gesturing the tickling with his figures. "At times, when I'm really down, my sense of humor pulls me out of my dark pit."

Yaniv got up to cook dinner, leaving the room. "Yaniv is special," Debbie leaned over to whisper to Devine once Yaniv was out of earshot. "He's like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. When he's behaving well, he's just amazing," she said lovingly. Indeed, Yaniv turned out to be an amazing cook, emerging from the kitchen with three plates of deliciously seasoned fried fish.

"How do you two know each other?" asked Devine inquisitively. Sucking his fingers noisily after wolfing down his fish, Yaniv said, "I went through a major crisis after my mother died. To regain my balance, I volunteered in the autistic children's society. It was there I met Roy, Debbie's eleven-year-old son, and over time, I got to know Debbie too." "Yaniv is wonderful with Roy," said Debbie, smiling

tenderly at Yaniv. "And he needs a mother figure in his life." Devine looked at the two of them thinking what an amazing world this is, and that there are so many kinds of relationships between people. It was obvious that the bond between them wasn't physical, but they deeply cared about each other.

Devine looked at Debbie's fingers, her nails long and perfectly curved, dark crimson. "You have beautiful nails," she said. "Why, thank you," responded Debbie with a friendly smile. "I once dated a man who said my hands are like Mona Lisa's." "Devine, show me your hands," asked Yaniv. Shyly, Devine exposed her hands that were tucked between her closed legs. "Wow," said Yaniv, "these are hard-working hands." Devine laughed, embarrassed. "Do you want some more wine?" suggested Yaniv generously, while pouring himself another glass.

"You drink too much, Yaniv," said Debbie.

"Yes I know, I'm trying to quit but I just can't. It got me into serious trouble. I had several car accidents and I'm in denial about the many traffic offences I committed while drunk," he admitted, showing no remorse.

"Well, it makes an interesting change to hear about someone who has a drinking problem after all those people in class who smoke grass all day long," said Devine lightly.

"Ya, you're right about that. Do you know how to identify the stoned ones at the university?" he asked.

"Not really," she answered.

"Well, I can tell you a lot about drugs. They have a terrible effect on the mind."

"I once had a psychotic attack after not sleeping for five days because I took lots of energy pills. I talked to the mountains, the houses, the street. I saw the mountain melting into burning lava. It was horrible. I lost total control. I remember standing in the middle of my parent's living room screaming: "Stop it, stop it." It took three

days for it to pass.

Listening quietly, Debbie said: "You're lucky you got out of it. Some people don't. I know a woman with curly hair who thought she was a sheep so she kept saying Me-Me-Me." They sniggered, imagining the scene. "Well, I once walked in the street with a pencil and I wanted to stab someone, and I don't know why," confessed Yaniv. Devine and Debbie looked at him, fear crawling into their hearts, realizing they didn't know what this man was capable of.

"You're lucky," said Devine, trying to find the best in every situation. "It must have been an amazing experience, which some people never have."

"Yes, sure," said Yaniv in a small voice. "It's not really behind me yet. I still suffer from paranoia every now and again." There was a long silence, and then Debbie suggested they go out. They drove to the beach, it was a cool night, and the cheerful, slightly drunken, conversation faded. Devine gazed with droopy eyes at the sea, thinking about the amazing changes that happen to the water from day to day.

The sound of an aggressive dispute drove her out of her musing. Debbie and Yaniv were having a fight over something apparently serious. Yaniv, standing by the car, yelled "You are a fat motherfucker bitch" while spitting and waving his arms in the air.

"You eat five burgers a day without blinking," he accused her, and automatically shielding her body with her hands, she retorted, "No, I don't!"

"Yes, you do. And you blame everyone else for your problems, but it is all you. You are such an egocentric bitch; you can't see anyone but yourself." They were yelling about money and Debbie insisted that he immediately return the two books and the key to her apartment. Devine stood there looking at Yaniv, who seemed to be an entirely different person, filled with sadism and cruelty.

Yaniv continued viciously attacking Debbie with all the intimate information he knew about her for a while longer

until finally, he grew tired and did not speak anymore. On their way home, Yaniv tried to take hold of Devine's hand. Perhaps this whole performance of rage and humiliation was intended just for her. But she made a promise to herself: she would never share any intimate secrets with him. He was never to be trusted.

"I have wanted to put an end to this relationship for a long time," he told her in the car. "I cannot bear her. She's a liar and I don't trust her. She thinks she's better than everyone and she is constantly pressuring me to live with her. The only good thing about her is that she educates me about Greek plays, knowledge that I later use to argue with the professor in class," he said humorously.

"Why did you agree to go out with me?" he suddenly asked, followed by silence. "I am doing research, you are my 'informant,'" she replied hesitantly. He laughed and said, "You're cute. I'd like to go out with you again." "I think you're a nice guy," she said diplomatically, "but we barely know each other." He wouldn't take no for an answer, and Devine did little to discourage him.

"Well, then why don't you get to know me? You know, you're hard to read. One minute, you get close to me, the next, you can't get away quick enough. I find you very appealing," he said, looking at her intensely. "Fine," she relented, eager to put an end to this conversation. She had absolutely no intention of pursuing any kind of relationship with him, but didn't think it was smart to antagonize him when he was in such a volatile state.

"I want to go home and sleep. Good night," she said, as they sat in her car, which was parked outside his house. "OK, but I want you to know I'm really happy we dated," he smiled mischievously, placing emphasis on "dated." And before she could stop him, he planted a kiss on her cheek and hopped out of the car. She felt nauseous at the intimacy and was furious with herself for not rejecting him. On Sunday morning, everyone in the group would know that she had "dated" Yaniv. That gruesome thought haunted her all the way home and the day after.

CHAPTER 4

FLEETING EXISTENCES

Leon's teaching style was definitely interesting. The promise of gaining complete self-control over their emotions and selves wasn't as easy as the students expected it to be. Leon's favorite exercise which he called "objects" had earned him a bad reputation. Standing in front of the class, Leon boasted: "I have made many enemies throughout the years because of this exercise. It is very difficult for some people, as I demand that you expose yourselves in the process. Don't perform; just be yourselves. You will have three minutes to perform, and I want you to bring objects and garments that will reveal three of your personality traits."

"And strip as much as you can, because that what the teacher likes," a cynical voice was heard saying from the back podium.

Leon turned his head sharply, his eyes seeking out the person who dared to question his integrity. "Who said that?" he roared. "I did," said Valentino. "I talked to people from second and third year and they told me that's what you like," he continued bravely.

"That is not true!" shouted Leon, embarrassed and angry. "I will not tolerate you saying such a thing!" If Valentino had heard such a rumor, there was a strong chance that everyone was talking. That was worrying, especially with new winds blowing in the university. An investigation committee had been recruited to push its nose into how he and his colleagues were running the department.

"I do not want to hear of that again. We are here to become actors. An actor uses his body, his clothes, to act. I urge you all to be bold, and don't be afraid to reveal

yourself. Your audience will never be bored if you put your body and soul into acting.”

Rachel didn't like this at all. “But if I do that, I'll just cry for thirty minutes.”

“Well,” Leon said, looking at her critically with his glaring eyes and bushy eyebrows, “you don't have time for that. Has any one here been a combat fighter in the army?” He looked questioningly at the group. “Does anyone know what it is like to get dressed into uniform in three minutes?” And to illustrate the idea to the majority of females in the group, he continued with the following example. “A stewardess falls asleep immediately before she has to get on a flight. She has three minutes to get into her clothes, looking immaculate. Consider which of your personality traits would emerge in such a situation. The purpose of this exercise is to help discover different aspects of your personality.”

As Leon was the teacher, and they all sought his approval, they did what he asked. One after the other, feeling hesitant and unsure, but nevertheless with courage, the girls and boys stripped down to their underwear, and quickly put their clothes back on within the three-minute allotted time period. “You must be physically active. I want you all to be huffing and puffing by the time this exercise is over. Don't think, just do.”

Devine watched how the group worked to transform itself. The removable walls were decorated each time anew to create their little rooms at home, with colorful pictures, printed cloth from India, little statues, pillows, carpets, books, records, musical instruments, cakes and vegetables, as well as a gas mask. All of these items were intended to create the environment Leon demanded, little worlds constructed, exposed and folded back again like the one-day bloom of a butterfly.

Devine wrote in her diary: “I watch these worlds and think how true to life they are. We build temporary environments to protect and nurture ourselves, but our

security and sense of control are illusory. Within seconds, our lives can dramatically change: the roofs over our heads can be lifted, our jobs can disappear within seconds, relationships can evaporate instantly and we do not know when our last breath would be. Yet there is a tender and vulnerable beauty to it all exactly because of that fluctuation, making life wild and precious in all its manifestations”.

§

Devine was starting to enjoy the creative liberty she had been given. In an improvisation exercise, her group decided to stand at a grave departing from a loved relative, when suddenly she turned into a werewolf, howling while biting people’s arms and waving a stick around as she jumped on a chair. Leon stopped the improvisation and the group laughed heartily at her wild outburst, Jon patting her back, “easy, easy.”

“I have only just begun,” Devine thought to herself, smiling. She felt that sweet and familiar sensation course through her body. It was a mixture of adrenalin and joy. A part of her, that had been lying dormant for a long time, had been reawakened. She forced herself to take a deep breath, and remember why she was here in the first place. The last thing she wanted to do was to step on other people’s toes, and lose cooperative research informants. No, she would have to be more subdued in these acting exercises.

She had forgotten (or chose to forget) how powerful it was to act. It engulfed her whole being. She was sixteen years old when she first performed in dance theater. While performing the lead role, she became involved in an intense relationship with two other girls that was laced with lust and jealousy. Later, when she studied theater, there was another girl who got the lead role this time. She

was torn by conflicting emotions. Her overwhelming desire to succeed and vicious jealousy awakened feelings of anger inside her. But mostly, she was angry at herself for not being good enough.

But all that was behind her. "I didn't come here for this," she reminded herself and decided she was not going to participate in the first monologues evening. "I'm out of the game," she kept telling herself and others, and the students reacted with bewilderment and relief.

CHAPTER 5

LITTLE SOCIAL WORLD

So Devine became an observer. She watched the students leave the studio at the end of classes. The Jews were quiet and caught up in their own worlds while the Arabs danced and sang as they walked to their cars. She also documented who stayed in class and who went out to smoke in the corridor. The class seemed to be divided into three main groups. There were those students who would smoke and gossip outside the studio with Leon, who himself was a chain smoker. Then there were those who chose to socialize inside, and talk about their private lives. Finally, the creative students stood at the back of the studio, lingering by the piano, as they sang and danced. The breaks provided the greatest opportunities for creativity, play, and laughter.

Devine didn't like going out into the corridor. She disliked the atmosphere and stench of cigarette smoke. She preferred to stay indoors with the creative ones. Maher and Abed at times initiated short conversations with the Jewish girls, who would socialize in a group. Salam played the flute and drum with the creative bunch at the back, and Toni and Marian, both Christians, sat outside smoking with the other smokers. There were of course those who zigzagged between groups: David and Sofia were as comfortable among the smokers as they were among the more creative types. Sofia, a new immigrant from Russia, possessed a sharp sense of purpose and direction. A woman who knew what she wanted, yet was always pleasant and easy-going, Sofia was comfortable in different social situations, without needing an emotional connection to any group in particular. She was stable as a rock in the midst of a turbulent river.

When Leon's

need for a smoke disrupted the flow of performances, Devine would head toward the dark corner by the piano, where two or more people would play and sing. Sigal was a gifted piano player who learned to play on her own as a child through improvisation during long lonely days at home. Jon played soft romantic melodies on a guitar, and standing dignified by the piano, Salam played deep enchanting tunes and rhythms on his silver flute and Bander drum. Devine joined in with her deep alt voice. Dalia played many instruments – an acoustic and electric guitar, full set of drums, and also she did some vocal training. When Maher came by to listen, he grabbed a Darbuka and started drumming ecstatic rhythms that made Meirav, who was an Aerobic dancer, dance frantically. To the humming of a soft tune, they all danced slow court dancing, feeling uplifted, smiles of pleasure illuminating their faces. Shyly, though clearly talented, Orit sang a little tune she made up with a quivering voice, and they would stop their ballyhoo to listen to her delicate voice.

CHAPTER 6

THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE BRAVE

Some people behave as if this is group therapy rather than acting classes,” said Rachel, puffing her cigarette smoke to the ceiling while sitting with Saline on a bench outside the studio. “I still don’t have that rush I was waiting for that would make me feel I’m in deep training,” said Saline, gazing at the wall in front of her. “Yes,” said Rachel in agreement. “There’s not enough acting,” said Saline, “too much academic stuff. I wish I studied acting somewhere else. I don’t have time to waste. I am already twenty-six, and I want to have a family.”

Rachel smiled and hugged her. “Oh, I love you so much. I was married, but I gave up my marriage to become an actress. This is all I want.”

“You did?” asked Saline amazed. “How could you?”

“I don’t know, I just felt as if there was something missing. We were together for six years and everybody was certain we would be together forever. We had everything – a wonderful wooden cottage, a husky dog called Shona. It was perfect and calm. But then, I started feeling troubled and dissatisfied. “Is this what I want to do with my life? I want adventure, ambition, success. I want to become a star. My ex couldn’t have been more different. He had zero ambition.”

Saline interrupted her. “Why did he have to be ambitious? Surely marriage is not a competition?”

“No,” Rachel answered, “but I felt he was holding me back. I wanted to find out what I was made of. And I feel now that I do. But saying goodbye was hard. I still remember that traumatic day. Two friends helped me gather my belongings and say goodbye to his parents who were very dear to me. His brother, usually so level-headed

and controlled, hugged me so tight, I couldn't breathe. He begged me not to leave. We both cried. It was even worse with Shona, who could sense something bad was happening. She kept jumping on me, licking my face imploringly, as if begging me to stay. But I got in the car and never looked back. I still love him dearly, but I don't believe that 'love conquers all,' like I used to. There are more important things in life," she said, wiping a tear from her eye.

"You're really brave, Rachel. I couldn't do that. I need my boyfriend too much," said Saline softly, stroking her friend's head.

"What do you think, Saline? Should I tell my story as an exercise in Sylvia's class?" asked Rachel, suddenly perking up.

"Sure. It's moving," answered Saline.

"Great. Let's go in," said Rachel, getting up as she extinguished the burning cigarette under her high-heeled boot.



Devine found out that her meals with the students at the university's vegetarian restaurant got her the best informal knowledge about the things they cared about. It was on one of these days that David and Anat joined her. The two of them spent a lot of time together. Sitting down beside her, David gave Devine a big warm smile. "I'm hungry as a wolf," he joked, elbowing her then quoted from monthly pythons comedy "nots, nots, say no more" he laughed. "You do have a British humor. Do you watch Monty Python a lot?" she asked, remembering how she and her friends loved them in her early twenties.

"Yes I do. I think they're hilarious," he said.

"You can't take anything he says seriously," interrupted Anat, pointing her fork at him accusingly. "He never

expresses real emotions. Everything's a joke to him. Even the holocaust is funny."

Without flinching, David smiled and said, "Well, yes. I do like black humor. I used to have a friend, a really close friend, with whom I had a music band. One day, he was killed in a terrorist suicide attack," he said so calmly that Devine giggled nervously. "He died the night before a performance so we asked the audience to stand in a moment of silence in his memory, and while every one was standing in silence, our mutual friend, Eric, began eating a sandwich. And I said: 'Oh, dear, you shouldn't eat a sandwich now. It's not appropriate,' to which he replied, 'OK, I'll eat quietly. I'm hungry. I have not eaten all day.' It was just hilarious," he said smiling proudly.

"Weren't you afraid to joke like that in front of everybody?" asked Devine with a shocked smile on her face. David responded with ease. "We thought humor was the best way to remember a very lively and humorous person, and I think the audience understood that and laughed with us," he said, digging his fork into the juicy meat.

Anat didn't like this at all. "But weren't you sad over your friend?" She asked accusingly.

"Yes, I did cry over him. I still miss him a great deal, but that was my way of recognizing his loss. It was better than standing like two jerks up on stage in a moment of silence. It's better to joke and laugh. In principle, I'm against death rituals, because I think it means nothing to those who die."

Anat was becoming impatient with his seemingly flippant attitude toward death. "If a person wants to be buried, you have to respect that," she said. David continued to remain calm. "I don't believe in the afterlife. All that is important happens in life itself," he said gazing far through the window. "Well..." lashed out Anat, who attacked her mushroom casserole angrily, "there are people for whom

death *is* important.”

At that point, the conversation ground to a halt. But David had not finished, conscious that he had an audience. “I don’t believe in many things you take for granted. I believe in anarchy. I think the current system of authority has created a bunch of useless professions such as lawyers, accountants, and the sort. All crime is a product of the method of governance. Our real challenge today is to liberate minds through education,” he concluded gravely.

Devine liked that. She liked David. But Anat was clearly tired of him and his cold rational thinking. “I like cats,” she said quietly trying to steer the conversation to more familiar territory. She paused for a minute, then confessed. “I’m really upset. I know I’ll be a bad actress and all the directors will hate me because I don’t like rehearsals. I don’t like repeating the same thing over and over again.”

“Well the idea is that you find something new every time,” said David calmly.

“I know but I hate it. I’m a bad actress. I know I am. I barely did the monologue three times.” She was on the verge of tears. “You are not a bad actress, dear Anat,” David reassured her gently, as if protecting his delicate lady in distress. “You’re just not professional yet.” This time his words had a positive impact as Anat lifted her head, her face gleaming with a large grin.

CHAPTER 7

INNER GARDENS

The wide stairs leading to the studio were a popular spot to socialize. The students from the plastic arts department slumbered there too and their conceptual exercises such as raw chunks of poultry hanged from the walls. At some point there were also mounds of parsley and strawberries neatly stacked on the floor but that morning the space was empty and white, and the only people there were Sigal and Devine who were sitting on the lower stairs.

“I have a terrible stomachache,” moaned Sigal miserably, just as Sabila arrived, looking glamorous in a bottle green dress and a pair of Japanese sandals on her neatly manicured feet. “Stop bitching,” said Sabila affectionately to Sigal. Finding a spot on the stairs next to Devine, she abruptly turned to her. “Do you believe in god?”

Devine was taken aback. The one topic of discussion she made sure to avoid was religion. “Yes, I do,” she answered quickly. “Do you believe in Jesus?” Sabila probed deeper.

“No, I’m Jewish, but my belief is not connected to religion,” Devine answered, feeling increasingly uncomfortable.

“You project a spiritual aura that I found among Christian believers whom I met in the States,” answered Sabila. “You’re also a really good actress. You have amazing control over your body,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Thank you. You’re very talented yourself,” said Devine.

“Thanks,” said Sabila, sober and collected. “I studied acting at high school, and finished top of my grade. I have a lot of professional experience as I worked in an entertainment quartet for a year or so. We performed in

hotels and institutes for the disabled.”

“Wonderful,” said Devine sensing the young woman’s stamina.

At that moment, Maher galloped cheerfully down the stairs with a bunch of friends, holding different items for the objects exercise he was about to perform. Maher was full of zest, always involved in something. He enjoyed the social aspect of university life, and the opportunity to meet Christian girls with liberal attitudes from good homes, who were willing to date him despite the traditional prohibition against marriage between Muslims and Christians.

Maher was gentle and romantic in his own unique way. At home, in his family house in the village, he tended a little flower garden, much to the bewilderment of his family, who couldn’t fathom why he would grow something that you couldn’t eat. He listened to Arab Jazz music, and, as a talented comedian, he performed with Abed in the Arab villages of the Galilee. Today it was his turn to exhibit his world, and he was excited. “You are invited to my show,” Maher shouted to the girls as he disappeared into the studio followed by his group of enthusiastic attendants.

As Devine, Sabile, and Sigal followed him entering the studio, they met a joyful commotion. Yaniv was tapping on Abed’s large back while Salam thumped the drum and Brian played the guitar. The girls laughed at the whole scene and joined in wild dancing.

“They certainly know how to liven up a party,” Yaniv told Devine later, assuming she would know he was referring to the Arabs in class. She had to admit that the Arabs in class did perk up the slightly depressive atmosphere at times. It seemed as though they were less obsessed with their individual identity, and had a heightened consciousness of being part of a greater whole.

The studio was filled with musical instruments brought

in by Maher for his objects exercise. Usually there was a bed, a large oval mirror, and a closet that the students used during this exercise. The exercise called for three different actions using objects that depicted three different character traits. It had to be completed in three minutes. Devine made a list of the objects that Maher brought: a poster of a soldier being shot with the word “Why?” written in large black print; a mirror with a towel hanging from it; a pair of sandals; a picture of an Arab peasant with a traditional Cafia; various musical instruments; and a large plastic pail.

As the class began, Maher’s previous boldness disappeared and he stood awkwardly in front of the group. “I will perform the qualities of decisiveness, quick responsiveness, and punctuality,” he said meekly while Abed whispered to Devine under his breath, “and laziness.” Maher and Abed were good friends, but they tended to taunt one another.

Maher exited and reentered the room seconds later to the rhythmic music bursting from a CD player. He laid down his bag and took off his shoes. Opening the closet, Maher took out a sweater, pulled his shirt off, and quickly wriggled into a new one. Then he let his hair loose and lifted a bag from the floor, removing a bottle of Coke, some fruit, and a can of humus. He put his bag on the bed, washed his hands in the large plastic washing pail then rinsed the tomato as well. He then dried it with a cloth and sliced it. Rolling up his sleeves, he opened the can of humus spread. Then sliced the cucumber, spread the humus on the bun and neatly arranged the vegetables on top. Licking the corner of the bun where the humus oozed out of the bun, he grabbed his bag and left the room.

“Well. What was good about that?” sighed Leon despairingly. “The food,” called out big Abed. “He was breaking the rules. We are not allowed to eat in here,” shouted Yaniv. “I’m hungry,” said Rachel and asked to be dismissed. “No, you can’t just go out whenever you feel

like it,” Leon snapped at her irritably. “This exercise was not good enough. I know it takes time to understand what I’m asking for, but you must be more daring. You showed us your front porch – the Arab who’s opposed to war and knows what a good meal is. Now I’d like to see your inner world, something from the hidden corridors of your soul. That’s much more difficult to achieve,” Leon said dramatically. Maher felt deflated. He did not know what more he could possibly do. How could he know his inner world? Where should he look? It was a mystery to him.

§

Yaniv lay down on the podium. Although he became the subject of much mockery, he seemed to be resilient. He could certainly throw the truth in people’s face. The group laughed at his blunt comments and kept away from him. He would come into class, reeking of booze, and, indifferent to everyone in the room, would find a spot in the studio where he would stare at the wall or ceiling. His sunglasses perched on his nose, he would tap his feet slowly. Every now and again, he would come out with a radical statement about his hatred towards Arabs and homosexuals and that they should all burn in hell only to ask after a few minutes to be excused because he has to pee.

The only one who kept a strange friendship with him was Devine, who felt partially responsible for him. She called Debbie to try to reconcile the two of them, but met with a strong wall of resistance.

“Listen, I don’t want anything to do with that psychopath. I mothered him for a year and a half. Dressed him, sometimes even washed him up when he was heavily drunk. I admit he can be sweet sometimes, but I’m warning you - he is a very dangerous man. Do you know he almost went to jail because he beat someone to a pulp on the

beach? The only reason he got away with it was because of his rich father who has the right connections. He's already been hospitalized twice. I don't want to deal with him anymore."

Debbie stopped talking, waiting to hear Devine's reaction. Devine said nothing, and Debbie continued.

"Did you know he belongs to a cult? They believe in the resurrection of Christ. He made me come with him once and pray with him. I tried really hard to be kind to him, I did, but I give up. I have had enough of violent men." She stopped talking. He had obviously hurt her deeply. "I think I have said enough. All the best to you." And that was the end of their conversation.

Yaniv didn't seem to mind the loss of his caregiver. He was too busy making new friends in class, inviting all of them to his birthday party and attending theirs. During the parties, he got drunk and harassed the girls. Sigal was his main victim. In one party, he grabbed her in the kitchen, pushed his tongue into her mouth and pressed himself against her, breathing heavily. Although she managed to push him away, she felt violated after the experience. Explosions of anger kept erupting inside her in the days that followed. However, she didn't report to any one what had happened. She doubted anyone would believe her. They would say she flirted with him. It wasn't true.

As for Yaniv, his father's connections in the university shielded him from Leon's critical eye while he enjoyed the audience of the theater class. Standing in front of them with bloodshot eyes, he would punch the air while tearing his shirt open, throwing a chair with unbelievable power and then slamming his fists against one of the removable walls. This had struck the group with fear to the point that Leon was forced to intervene. "It is difficult to act out violence on stage. You cannot just bring your violent urges to the studio, and act on them. Acting requires thoughtful planning. Channel your anger without breaking walls,

please.”

“Just let me do the exercise,” Yaniv insisted.

“I’m warning you,” asserted Leon. “If I see you are losing control, I will stop you.”

Performing his objects exercise, Yaniv did a handstand in front of the mirror, then stripped naked, and smeared lipstick and eyeliner over his face. Finally he turned to face them all, and stretching his arms like a huge ape, he began to shiver, his eyes rolling back as in a trance. Like the rest of them, Devine was bewildered and terrified by Yaniv’s intensity. Yaniv continued shivering for a few more minutes before he closed his eyes, relaxed his stance, and regulated his breathing.

A thick silence loomed over the studio. Finally, Leon broke the spell and spoke. “What was wrong with your exercise, my darling? Or let me put it differently: exactly which qualities were you trying to exhibit?”

“I don’t know,” replied Yaniv, suddenly small and shy. “My emotions were genuine, not forced. I acted in the same way that I would without an audience. What is wrong with that?”

“Well,” answered Leon without any hesitation. “Do you sleep on a bed without a sheet?”

“Sometimes I do.”

“Well, your space doesn’t create any theatrical illusion whatsoever. I suggest that instead of performing your stretching exercise in public, you choose a concrete action. I don’t think you took any risks in that exercise. Simply trying to shock the audience is not good enough. There was a lot of energy in this exercise, and a definite feeling that you were on the verge of losing control, which, I have to say, was rather thrilling to watch. Thank you,” said Leon dryly. The class clapped their hands.

Devine was overwhelmed by Yaniv’s exercise, which had all the visible qualities of a trance that she had learned about in other indigenous cultures. The intensity of Yaniv’s movement was beyond violent; it was an energetic

explosion. After class, she walked over to him as he was standing outside the studio smoking. “What you did was very intense,” she praised him.

“Thanks,” he said, sounding defeated. “Leon didn’t like it. I never get it right.”

“That’s not true,” Devine said. “I think you’re talented. You just need to learn how to channel it. And learn how to express other emotions besides anger and aggression,” she said gently.

“Yes, I look forward to that,” he said, sucking his cigarette fervently. “I know Leon didn’t think so, but I planned this exercise really carefully. I thought we were supposed to bring our demons and monsters. I banged my head and fists against the wall like I used to do in the psychiatric ward. I have been doing that since childhood. In the hospital, they cover the walls with sponges so you don’t hurt yourself. From that, I progressed to acting out the constant wish to transform. During a psychotic attack, I can do all kinds of things that are symbolic acts of transformation – I turn things upside down, including myself, do headstands or turn myself into a woman. I try to break out of my inner barriers, to tear myself apart...” he talked rapidly, but then hesitated.

“Well, I think I understand better now what Leon wants. Next time, I’ll perform the exercise without violence or any grand gestures,” he said smiling. Devine wasn’t sure taming him was the answer. She thought to herself how special he was with his wild, volcanic energy.

§

A few days later, Leon instructed the group to improvise a scene in which soldiers arrest Palestinians during a curfew. As he sat watching their attempts, Leon noticed Devine writing, hunched over her notebook. He moved beside her, patting her back with a heavy hand. “Are you writing

everything that is being said or done in class?” he asked with bewilderment.

“Yes,” she answered shyly, embarrassed by the sudden attention and the physical closeness that made her feel small. He nodded his head thoughtfully, then moved back to his chair. He was very warm and paternal towards some of the girls in class. Sigal liked sitting at his feet, and he would pat her head. When a class was over, she would jump in front of the rest of the group to ask him for feedback on her exercises. “You don’t appreciate what I’m doing,” she shouted at him once. “I do appreciate what you do, but you want immediate results, and it takes time,” Leon said, trying to calm her.

Following the improvisation scene with the soldiers, Leon called them to the front of the studio. “Monologues night is this Tuesday, so I want to see what you people have prepared,” he requested. “But first I want to say a few words about the event. At the start of each act, you must break the ice by introducing yourself, looking at the audience straight in the eye, and then only when you are calm and steady, begin your monologue. Your action will save you. Action saves from death. If you don’t know what you are going to do, the audience will eat you alive,” he said, looking like he was going to eat them himself. “OK, who’s first?”

Shlomit, her hair neatly combed behind her ears, stood erect and began reciting the text, with only her hands moving, signaling in different directions. “Stop, stop, stop...Why does it look as if you directing traffic? Put more energy and passion into it. Give more of yourself. Next please.”

Rachel walked up to the front. She started to introduce herself, her shoulders and whole body wiggling. They all laughed. “Stop wiggling,” he yelled. She tried again, but her body was talking its own language, and continued wiggling. “Stop it,” Leon barked. “Attack, be assertive...do it!” Rachel began again, managing to control her body, but

not her head which shook from side to side. "I can't, I can't, I am sorry," she muttered desperately, walking back to her seat.

Leon, tired, grabbed his bag. "I need a cup of tea," he said getting up.

"Can I ask you a few questions?" asked Devine. "Come," he invited her to accompany him. She stumbled after him as they walked through the dark halls and passages of the art studios and up the stairs of the production offices. These were two small rooms, filled with drawings of costume designs, scenery models, a large comfortable couch, and a small kitchen where Leon prepared himself a hot cup of tea.

"God, I need this tea," he said to himself. "I have to tell these kids that fifty percent of what I say is not Gospel," he said while stirring his tea with the manners of an Englishman. Devine nodded her head apprehensively.

"I remember my teacher was like a guru to me," she confessed.

"Yes, it is very easy for that to happen," Leon said, settling into the couch. "That's why I laugh at myself in front of them. I don't want them to take everything I say so seriously. I wish they were capable of making a distinction between who I am and the knowledge I impart." Devine, watching him sip his tea, felt suddenly disenchanted, and all she could see was a tired aging man. Embarrassed by this sudden bare observation, all her questions evaporated. She asked to be excused and returned front stage.

§

Abed had been a comedian for some time. Considering he was only twenty-one years old, he had established quite a reputation for himself among Israeli Palestinians. His parents had always encouraged him to be a performer and

an actor, and his father even used to beat him when he ran away from his theater lessons. He found politics much more interesting and when he was seven he got involved in the local communist party. He loved the party and the socialist ideology, which gave him a sense of order and optimism about his future in a land of coexistence. But then, when his friend was killed during the upheavals of October 2000, his hopes crumbled. He could no longer trust the system, and there were questions the communists just couldn't answer. So he became a member of the "Village Sons" – a secular Palestinian movement that called for the return of the Palestinian refugees, an end to Israeli occupation, and the establishment of a secular democratic Palestinian state over Israeli territories. He started organizing protests, becoming famous all over the village for his charisma and conviction. During the American invasion in Iraq, villagers talked about how the Iraqi communication minister was telling lies and Abed started mimicking him. It was a huge success, as people in the village started inviting him to perform for them. Soon after that, Abed built a small snack bar at the main junction of his village. Iraqi music was played there, and on one of the walls he painted a large map of the Arab world. It became a center for Palestinians from the whole Galilee area to discuss politics.

Soon enough, the area's planning and building committee ordered him to tear down the bar because he had no permits. Abed was frantically worried as the snack bar was his sole source of income to support his whole family. Not only that, but he was also lagging behind with his studies because he spent the nights partying with Maher. Getting up in the morning was almost impossible.

But his main trouble was that he bored himself. He felt so confident on stage with his comic acting that he felt incapable of being successful at anything else. He felt like his smile was glued to his face. It was too dangerous to

show his sadness.

“You know,” he said once to Maher after they had downed a few shots of vodka, “I’m not sure if I have the right to study acting and be friends with the Jews. There are children in Gaza who want to become actors and instead they die. Some of these people I’m studying will join the army and become killers. I constantly play comedy, but the truth is that I hide pain that I do not want to be revealed to anyone. I don’t want the political issue to come between me and the Jewish students, but if they wouldn’t accept my pain as a Palestinian, I’ll give up everything,” he said, recoiling into himself.

§

The day before the monologues evening, Devine wrote in her field diary:

I was really sad and tired today. I miss my children. Dana, performing a woman in labor, found it difficult to act it out since she has never gone through this experience herself. I told her the voice should become coarse and very low, like the breathing and panting of a wounded animal. Sitting at the back, Yaniv said to me, “Vodka makes our heart merry.” I didn’t answer him, but I was very happy to see him, a friendly face after a long day. We held each other’s elbows for a moment and then I asked him if he’s preparing his monologue. He said it was hard for him to learn by heart and he couldn’t work much. I sat on the podium. Gentle Jon was playing the guitar, deeply absorbed. It’s good to be here with them. I feel at home.

CHAPTER 8

MONOLOGUES NIGHT

Devine entered the performance hall on the monologues evening without her usual enthusiasm. She didn't want to see people that night and the hall, which usually functioned as a lecture hall, encapsulated some of the dry, papyrus air academic spaces have. Doing the monologues there, with no scenery or objects to support the actors, the room seemed bare and lifeless.

The group standing by the stage greeted Devine as she approached them. She could sense their fear laced with excitement by their wide smiles and even wider eyes. They all looked larger than life, wearing clothes that exuded power, such as tuxedos, lawyer's robes, and cocktail dresses. It was evident that they had all made an effort to be impressive and attractive that evening.

"Why, you all look like you are headed for the Oscars tonight," said Devine, suddenly feeling awkward in her casual dress. They said nothing; probably because she was not part of the game. She felt like a coward as she watched them prepare and chat excitedly. She regretted now that she had opted out from participating. Sitting at the back, she gazed at the far corner of the stage, trying to curb the self-hatred she felt for not participating in this initiation rite.

She watched them walk on stage, bold and daring, each one with his or her own choice of clothes and demeanor. She reflected how if you took ethnicity and gender out of the equation, they were like beautiful sea creatures in a marine aquarium, each one with its own dazzling color and form. She tried to find a common theme, something she could write down, a pattern. But the only pattern she could ascertain was that there was no pattern. Each of

them was unique in behavior, looks, and chosen text. Even those who shared the same monologue presented an utterly different interpretation. It was refreshing to see their uniqueness.

Devine was tremendously moved by Marian's monologue. She performed Abigail from Arthur Miller's "The Crucible." Unlike the others, Marian wore a simple chaste black dress, her posture expressing an odd mixture of fragility and intensity. She begged Jon not to leave her. She begged him while maintaining her dignity, proud and convinced that they had truly loved one another. She performed a complex message by using her body. The text, her voice, her gaze, her breathing – each one told a focused well-edited little tale, and all combined into one grand emotional action.

Her breathing, which was like a wind blowing the sails of a little sports yacht, fluctuated during the monologue. She drew long, deep breaths as an expression of her anger over the lies that were being told about her followed by a pause and a quick whiff of air, which expressed her disdain that he believed she was like a child. All that time, the palms of her hands were open and bare, her twisted fingers exposing her inner turmoil. She became the archetype of a young passionate woman's yearning and suffering for a man.

That night, Marian's act was the most professional, and she won the contest. The others did not even come close. As Marian walked on stage to receive her prize, a check for one thousand shekel, she was hugged by Leon and the representative of the judges. She looked at her father, Daud, who was sitting in the audience. He was a well-accomplished actor himself, but had different hopes for his daughter. He had told her a million times that acting was no profession for an Arab woman.

"Please Daddy. I feel it's in my blood. Let me do my first degree in theater and see how it goes. After that, I'll choose a proper profession," she pleaded. "You'd hate it," Daud

said, as they ate dinner together that night. “You are just like your mother – you love to work. Actors are not fully productive people. Most of the time, they just hang around waiting for their next role. Frustrated.”

Yes, I am like my mother, Marian admitted to herself. Thank God. Mother has given me the common sense to survive in this terrible world. “I don’t have to be necessarily like you,” she mocked him, “fighting with everybody because I didn’t get the part I wanted.”

Daud got up to close the window, as the cold early winter rain poured in. “That’s easy for you to say now, but wait till you’re in the business. You need to be tough to survive.”

“That’s what Leon says. According to him, we have to be as fierce as lions to make it in this industry.”

“He’s right. He’s a good example of a real fighter, that man.” Daud and Leon had worked together several times.

In fact, Leon directed Daud on a production when Marian was born. Her birth had taken place on the night of the premier, and after the performance ended, instead of going out for a drink, as they usually would, they went to see the new born baby. She was beautiful.

“She’ll be a great actress one day,” said Leon gently, tickling Marian’s little nose. “Don’t say that. I want her to be a teacher or a doctor. No acting for her,” said Daud, kissing the little forehead of the fuzzy-haired creature.

CHAPTER 9

"DRINKING WITH THE "LOSERS"

As the evening drew to a close, the students crawled home to deal with their disappointment at not winning the contest. The smokers, who were, to a large degree, also the drinkers, decided to go out and have a drink. As they got to the pub, Daria, who was a familiar face there, was greeted warmly by the bartender. She seated herself comfortably by the bar, ordering her usual tequila.

The rest of them – Billy, Meirav, Rachel, and Sabila and her boyfriend – sat in a long row on either side of her.

"Gee," said Rachel, "I can't talk to Sabila because she's sitting on the other end of the row."

"Never mind," said Billy, busy with his menu.

"No, I don't get it, this is stupid. I don't want to sit like this," Rachel insisted. "Hey, Sabila," she called out, "let's move to another table so we can talk." Sabila hesitated. She might get stuck at that table with chatty Rachel, and she wouldn't have the chance to talk to Daria about their performances that night.

"OK," she said reluctantly. They moved to a far table, and everyone else quickly followed them, including Daria who was busy texting on her phone, her beautiful starved face illuminated by the cold blue light of the phone.

Rachel looked at Daria enviously. She seemed so calm and self-contained. "God, I feel like shit," Rachel exclaimed out loud. "How could I have forgotten the text like that? It's so embarrassing. I'm such a loser. I was so nervous. Do you know there are actors who throw up every time they have to get up on stage? And they are really good actors?" The others just stared at her with indifference. Each one of them was wrapped up in his own world.

At that moment, Devine arrived, unsure if she was welcome.

“Hi Devine,” they greeted her as she sat down beside Meirav. “Why didn’t you perform tonight? Isn’t it part of your research to participate with us?” asked Daria inquisitively.

“I had all kinds of reasons,” said Devine, “but basically I think I was too scared. I’ll do it next time,” she said, her eyes clinging to the tablecloth.

“It’s a real pity,” said Daria, “because it really helped us integrate as a group. I found out who is supportive and who’s not,” she said with a tone of self-affirmation as the rest of the group nodded. They were starting to feel better. Now that there was someone in a worst position than them. At least they had the courage to participate. “Ah,” muttered Devine, leaning back uncomfortably. She didn’t need to hear that.

“Are you going to take note of what we are saying here?” asked Billy concerned.

“Yes. But I invite you to write about me,” she said.

“Well, I don’t want to write about anyone,” responded Billy icily. “I don’t trust people who write everything down,” he said.

“Yes, it makes me paranoid,” said Daria, suddenly losing interest in her phone.

“Well, what can I say, I’m human. I am not going to write a cold analysis of who you are. You are not mice in a laboratory. Anthropology is more like writing a story. It’s about the meaning of things.”

Devine was trying hard to make them understand. “It’s like writing poetry for me – trying to capture the essence of human experience with all its diversity and richness.” But the words sounded empty and dull as soon as they rolled off her tongue. The group lost interest and returned to making their choices for the second round of drinks.

“Let’s get Devine all drunk,” sniggered Billy. But Devine, fully aware of her dark side, wasn’t sure it was a good idea.

Not wanting to further alienate herself from the group, however, she finally acquiesced.

“Fine. I’ll have just one drink,” she agreed, hoping that would help her get accepted by the group. They happily ordered her a double tequila and after mixing it with sprite, she bravely knocked it three times on the table, then swallowed it in one gulp. “Bravo,” they all cheered her as her sense of shame and inadequacy evaporated while the alcohol warmed her body.

“Wow,” she exclaimed, huffing the air out, “that feels good.” They all laughed, their faces seeming warm and friendly all of a sudden.

“Did you see what Yaniv did tonight?” said Rachel.

“Yes, he’s nuts. I tell you. That guy frightens me,” said Daria. “He has saliva foaming on the corners of his lips when he talks.”

“And he is relentlessly horny,” said Rachel, giggling.

“It’s not funny,” said Meirav, tucking her hair behind her ear. “Do you remember when he invited all of us to his birthday party? Well I was the only one who showed up. He lives in this rundown apartment, and when I got there he was already totally drunk. His eyes were rolling backwards, really frightening shit, and I was sitting there on my own with him in this empty dark room. He told me he was expecting to have all of me tonight. I immediately called my friend to come and pick me up and I couldn’t stop crying all the way home. Why does this shit have to happen to me?” She said.

“I think he’s a funny fellow. He has a great sense of humor,” declared Billy.

“That’s easy for you to say,” shouted all the girls at him.

“What did you all think about Marian’s monologue?” Sabila said, abruptly changing the conversation.

Oh, that child is very talented,” said Rachel patronizingly. There was a pause around the table as they reflected on their disappointment that was tinged with jealousy. An Arab had won the competition, and in a sense it had made

the defeat far more bitter.

"They are all really cool, the Arabs in our class. Especially Salam. He's terrific," said Billy.

"Well, he made a real mess of his monologue tonight. He took more than his stage time, and it wasn't fair," said Sabila impatiently.

"I think he's just undisciplined. He reminded me of a wild stallion," said Devine.

"That's a really nice way to define him," agreed Meirav, smiling at Devine. Then turning her body toward Devine, she whispered, "Could I stay at your place tonight?"

"Sure," said Devine, hiding her discomfort as she was going to stay at her mother's house that night. But she enjoyed Meirav's company. Not many people radiated warmth and softness like she did, and she felt the urge to comply.

"I thought you were coming to stay at my place," interjected Billy, clearly disappointed.

"Oh, I totally forgot," said Meirav embarrassed. She didn't want the others to know there was something going on between Billy and her.

"It's time for me to go," said Daria. "I have a date at the Hugo pub across the street."

"Then we should all be leaving," said Rachel, and they hurried to pay the bill. Devine made a mental note of their herd behavior.

As the others walked away following their chirpy goodbye kisses, Billy, Meirav, and Devine stood on the sidewalk while cars passed them by.

"So, what do you say, Meirav? Are you coming over to my place?" pressed Billy.

"Well," said Meirav, who desperately needed intense cheering up after tonight's disappointment, "I guess I will. I'll go to his place, Devine, because you know, he gets up late, and we don't have classes tomorrow."

"Well, I hope you two have a good night's sleep," said Devine lightly, walking off feeling barren. She remembered

merrier times when she used to mix alcohol with sex. She leaned against her car, sinking. She was such a loser with all the creativity she had not expressed, too scared to be revealed as an artist. She wanted to leave these foolish academic studies, aching with a newly enflamed passion to be an actress. Her senses numb from the alcohol, tears pouring down her face, she felt as if she was drowning in self-pity. Yes, she had always run away from the spotlight, from too much attention and appreciation, afraid of herself most of all, and now, now it was too late.

CHAPTER 10

THE PEOPLE WE LOVE AND HATE

“Today I would like you to act out the role of two characters: someone you love and someone you hate,” requested Sylvia, the second acting teacher, at the beginning of their Monday morning class.

“I don’t hate anyone,” said Marian innocently.

“I have heard that before, but I don’t believe it. Scratch the surface and I’m sure you will find someone you dislike,” said Sylvia wryly. “Just do the best you can. Who’s first?” she demanded. No one got up.

“Listen people, if you don’t jump into the water, the miracle of becoming an actor won’t happen. You should be fighting over who’s performing first.”

After repeating her request a second time, Dana walked to the front. “I’ll act out a person I love.”

Facing the group, she hunched her back and covered her hair with a big cloth, transforming herself into an old woman with a cracked voice. “Why do you have to go to India? You can find the same stench in Gaza,” she smiled an ancient smile. “You’re wasting your time on this vegetarian nonsense. Why was the cow created if not to be eaten?” She accused an invisible girl. “This girl will go to the university,” she said to the audience with a trembling voice, “and meet an Ashkenazi with blond hair and blue eyes who will become a cocky doctor. Oy...Capara Alai... go and work in a shoe shop instead. What do you need university for?” She called out loud, thumping on her thigh with indignation.

“I don’t understand why you smiled during your act, Dana,” asked Sylvia after the performance was over.

“I don’t know. I can’t stop. I really try,” she said smiling.

“Why does it bother everyone so much that I smile?” she later asked Devine.

“Perhaps because it seems involuntary. You smile regardless of your mood,” she answered. Dana and Meirav were eternal smilers. No matter how tragic or painful their experience, they smiled. It was as if their smiles were masks they couldn’t take off. “It’s not that I feel happy all the time,” explained Dana. “It’s just that I really want to be kind to people, to carry good energies with me wherever I go. But everybody attacks me for it.”

Next performing was Shlomit, acting someone she hates. Talking politely to an invisible partner, she said: “Yes, I’m already in my third year at the teacher’s seminar.” She then turned to an invisible person sitting on her other side, and this time said harshly: “Nu...when are we leaving?” Quickly, she returned back to her previous partner, smiling sweetly: “No thank you. I don’t want another bagel...” Turning once more, she said angrily: “Leave me alone. I want to go...” Instantly she transformed herself, smiled a big toothy smile, and calmly said: “Oh, yes, sorry, I wasn’t listening, yes you are right. These Fridays are so wonderful - we take it in turns to meet at someone’s house each time. It’s so cozy and fun.”

Shlomit’s polite and restrained character was replaced with Saline’s hated one, who leaned back against the chair, rattling keys between her fingers. In a deep masculine voice, she said: “I am fed up of managing this club, sitting and scratching my balls all day,” while touching her missing genitals. “Did you see those pussies that were here last night? Sure would like a bite of that flesh. Iris has gained weight, and I don’t know how to tell her. She gets on my nerves lately. Life stinks. Give me a cigarette. I’m fed up of this country - it’s all shit. That Benny is a son of a whore,” she said. Sighing heavily, she concluded: “What can I tell you? You’re all trash. Each and every one of you.”

The group laughed at her act. “Don’t laugh, it breaks concentration,” Sylvia said, shushing them.

Devine was next. "I'll perform someone I love," she said, thinking of her best friend, Shira, who now lived in Tel Aviv, after recently losing her father and brother. She began while wrapping her arms around her folded knees. "I am so happy you could come. I really need friends now. I miss my brother so much. With my father it was more complicated, because he was verbally abusive toward me at the end, but with my brother..." she paused, swallowing, choking from the sadness that overcame her unexpectedly. "He was like an anchor for me. After I divorced, he became my only advisor. I'd talk to him every day, and he always had this wonderful warm common sense. Dear, dear brother..." She said, rocking herself back and forth.

"It makes you think about what life is all about. We don't know what can happen to us tomorrow. What point is there in living?" She stopped although she felt she could go on forever. It felt so good to express her personal mourning through Shira. She was used to being in control all of the time so as to keep functioning. But now, all the pain that was stored up inside her was being released, and her tears expressed her personal sadness.

"That was very good, Devine," Sylvia smiled encouragingly. "Yes," concurred Sabila. "I could identify with that character. With that soft sadness." Devine smiled shyly and walked to her chair, wiping her tears with the soft palm of her hand. Dana caressed her head and Sigal hugged her warmly.

Deeply absorbed in her thoughts, Devine was surprised when during the break, Sigal, Dana, and Sunshine approached her, telling her how moving she was, and powerful. It felt like she was in the land of creativity where you are loved by the beauty of truth you dare to express. Half an hour later, she got up again to act out the person she hates. This time, she stood holding a broom in her hand. She swiped the floor nervously, then turned her furious face to an invisible person. She screamed out, "We don't want you here, go away. We know what you are, you

are a crazy woman, and you came from the hospital. We don't want people like you here," shouted Devine, letting her hair fall down, spitting at the invisible woman. "You're trouble, go away." Then she paused, and abruptly screamed, "Go away," her whole body shaking, eyes closed and hands waving in the air.

"Wow..." said Sylvia after a moment of silence. "The woman you did now and the one before are so different from one another. They are well performed, but I think you don't give this woman any positive sides. She's a caricature. I want you to also inject some light into the characters so they will be three-dimensional."

Devine nodded her head as sadness and desperation engulfed her. The memories of that incident with her neighbor came flooding back. It was a terrible time for her. She had just moved into a new apartment in that small northern town, weak and vulnerable after being hospitalized following a psychotic crisis that had put an end to her doctoral studies in Britain. Still struggling with remnants of delusional thoughts, newly separated from her husband, and in the middle of a bitter custody battle over her children, she found herself truly alone for the first time in her life.

As she was trying to settle into the tiny and bare apartment on the third floor of a modest apartment building near the sea, one of the movers banged her washing machine against her neighbor's door and her neighbor stormed out screaming at her. She felt humiliated, lost, and powerless against a torrent that threatened to devour her. She no longer had her status as a middle class educated woman to provide her with stability. Her identity was never in question until then: She was a married woman, mother of two, owner of an apartment and a golden Labrador. Now the thin layer of safety had been ripped away, and she was left with nothing but the stigma of a mentally ill woman.

CHAPTER 11

MASCULINE SENSIBILITIES

Sylvia was having a hard time with the group. It was too big and there were several “clever” ones who constantly disrupted whatever concentration she had managed to achieve. Jon was especially annoying, and today her patience was wearing thin. The students were rolling in couples on the floor improvising with contact improvisation when Jon started giggling and joking about two of the students’ position on the floor. She erupted: “You are wrong. You are absolutely wrong to think you can talk. Your little wise cracks are cute, but we are working here with the issues you are most uncomfortable about, things you don’t dare to do every day, and every joke you make...”

Jon was squirming with shame. “Listen, I do that because...”

“Don’t interrupt me,” she said sharply. “It takes us back to where we started about your willingness to expose yourself. You don’t realize the power of your words to make people feel like they want to retreat and hide in shame.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to do that,” said Jon, feeling terrible.

“Well, just stop,” she ended the conversation, and continued the lesson. But half an hour later, he was joking again. “I want you to let each part of your body say something else, scream its pain,” Sylvia instructed them, and as the group lay on the bare wooden floor, Jon’s voice rang out clear: “Did anyone hear my liver screaming?”

The whole group burst into laughter, ruining Sylvia’s best intentions to get them to be serious. “Get up, all of you. I’m sick and tired of you lot behaving like six years old. It’s infantile,” she shouted at them. “Now get out and

be back in five minutes. And this time, control yourselves.” They stormed out, the smokers to feed their addiction and the rest to the bathroom or cafeteria.

After a strong cup of coffee, over which she vented her dissatisfaction and anger to the production manager, Sylvia was back to herself.

“OK,” she said calmly when the group returned to the studio. “I’d like to see now the wordless scenes you have prepared for today.”

“What scenes?” asked Salam, unprepared.

“Well,” she said, impatience lacing her words, “if you would have been here for the last lesson, you would have known. Watch the others.”

Yaniv and Sunshine, the two most unpopular members of the group, performed their exercise together. They sat eating by a table. Sunshine was nervously eating her meal while Yaniv calmly finished his food and lit himself a cigarette. Sunshine walked over to him, grabbed the cigarette and tore it to pieces. He got up and lit another one, and sat down on the couch. Sunshine looked at him for a second and then lit herself a cigarette too. Walking over to him, she sat next to him, and they ended the scene sitting together calmly holding hands. When they did that, the whole group hurled insults at them, and Sabila and Daria booed at them angrily.

“You ruined your whole act with the happy ending,” commented Sylvia cynically, remarking that it was kitsch. Devine liked what they did; there was something calming and truthful about it and she wondered why the group didn’t accept their positive representation of a relationship.

The lesson was over, and Devine went off to have lunch. She spotted Valentino, one of the Arab-Christians members of the theater group, sitting on his own at the far end of the dining hall.

“Hi Valentino,” Devine called, approaching him confidently.

“Hi Devine, how are you?” he greeted her.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” she said, eager to skip the pleasantries.

“Would you be willing to teach me Arabic?”

“Well, sure why not?” he agreed, smiling. “But I have no teaching experience, I warn you,” he admitted humbly.

“It’s fine, I want to learn both the language and culture. I was wondering if you would be willing to teach me about songs and their meaning,” she asked, feeling very comfortable in his presence. They had met once by the elevators, and talked about her being much older than the rest of the class, and he had teased her by calling her “mama.”

“Sure, I happen to be a song writer and I play the Aud (an instrument of the string family).”

“Wow, great,” she said. “When can we begin? Can you start today? In thirty minutes?”

Thirty minutes later, they met in the office she was using at the Anthropology department.

“Could you sing me one of your songs?” she asked curiously, feeling like she had hit a goldmine.

“Sure,” he said, and he began to sing the most moving of songs.

“What did you sing?” Devine asked, once quiet fell over the room. “It was beautiful.”

“Loosely translated, here are the words.” And he started to translate his song into flawless Hebrew. “The leaves on the trees\on the pavement\remind me that autumn will be back soon\please return from the cold and protect me\it is enough that you are far and have forgotten me\only your closeness gives me pleasure,” he ended his recitation.

“This song is full of yearning,” she said, smiling.

“Yes,” he said. “Writing for me is a way of dealing with difficult emotions. I started writing when I was nineteen, after ending a three-year relationship with a girl. It was then that poetry entered my life,” he admitted, his legs

trembling nervously.

“Would you like to tell me about it?” she asked, slightly embarrassed that she might be intruding into his personal world.

“As a teenager, I worked occasionally at a radio station. A girl called in to the studio, and I liked the sound of her voice. So I took her phone number and we began talking on the phone. For three years we talked only on the phone. For a whole year we didn’t talk about love. She told me she was doing her final exams at school so nothing could happen between us. I told her that it doesn’t prevent us from talking. I’m not even talking about love, am I? But she insisted we end the relationship and I knew that I loved her. And all this happened over the phone. We developed an insane love just from our phone conversations. Even after she told me she loved me, she still refused to tell me where she lived.

“From the little information she shared, I tried to locate her whereabouts. I thought she lived on the upper side of town as she was Christian but her father was Jewish. One night, I left the house and walked all the way uptown. After walking for sometime, I stopped under a tree, and cried out ‘Susanna’ over and over again until finally I gave up and went back home. At that stage I had totally lost control over my feelings towards her, and after we spoke I would throw the phone out of the window. That was such a beautiful phase in my life,” he said nostalgically and smiled at Devine, who wasn’t sure if he was joking with her.

“Finally we stopped talking. The last words I said to her were, ‘I wish you were dead.’

“I was very sad for some time after that, but I managed to control myself most of the time. After a year the telephone rang and it was her. We talked and cried, and this time we met. It was worth it after three years. But after we met we decided that we wouldn’t see each other again, and I finally felt calm inside. I believe that sadness and

pain are wonderful. Happiness is not enough, especially for a poet. Happiness drowns your inspiration. Art depends on pain.”

Devine thought his story was tantalizing. Looking at Valentino’s small and meek features, it was hard to imagine such intensity from him. “Well, after that, I turned my attention to the political and social problems within Arab society. It gave me a connection to Arab culture, which is very rich. I embarked on a new chapter in my life,” he concluded. As Devine listened she recalled the story that Abed had shared a month earlier. With both boys, it felt as if they were channeling their sexual and emotional yearnings toward politics.

“How are you enjoying your studies?” Devine asked him. “Not so much,” he admitted, looking at his shoes, as if searching for something. “I find it hard to match up with partners. I feel like people don’t want to work with me. At the beginning, all the Arab students were together and it felt good, but now they split into couples and I’m on my own. I constantly feel they have something against me. I don’t understand why because usually I get along really well with people,” he said worried.

“I would give it some time, take it easy, enjoy your studies,” she said warmly.

“I don’t think I’m going to survive three years of this,” he admitted.

“I hope you do,” she said getting up, signaling that the conversation was over. “Thank you for sharing with me your song and story,” she said.

“I’d be happy to talk to you again,” he suggested.

“Yes, that would be great,” Devine said smiling. “I’d be happy to hear some political songs next time,” she suggested.

“Ah, well, fine,” he said, his face revealing his sudden disillusionment. “See you,” he said and disappeared into the long dark corridor.

They didn’t meet again. Valentino changed his studies to

become a lawyer shortly after, following a dispute with the production manager. It seemed like he had finished his role on their intense little stage as no one mentioned his name again.

CHAPTER 12

SISTERHOOD

Miriam sat quietly observing the other students before class. Devine found in her a pure honesty and lack of pride, a sort of flowing gentleness that surrounded her. She never demanded attention or struggled to be at the center of things. Studying acting was a great challenge for her as she was defying her parent's religious wishes. Internally, she debated everything that happened in class. Sometimes she couldn't stand the group's sexual innuendos and their physical intimacy. At home, she was taught that touching was to be kept to a minimum.

After a while, she developed a curiosity about the way the students would communicate through touch. It felt as if touching had the power to communicate in a way that words couldn't, and it transcended any competitiveness and jealousy that ordinarily fractured the group. Certain students were more affectionate than others. For instance, she noticed that the girls touched one another more than the men. They patted each other, played with each other's hair, massaged each other's backs, hugged and kissed on the cheek.

In contrast, rarely did the men touch one another, and only briefly. Men of the same nationality would only hug during an exercise and while performing homosexuals. Once, Abed and Yaniv gave each other a bear hug, in a moment of friendly intimacy. It was interesting to observe that although the men and women would often flirt, hug, and caress each other, it didn't develop further than that. In fact, the only couple in the group was Meirav and Billy, and their relationship only lasted briefly.

Miriam realized that touching was the best way to make peace with someone, as once you are touched by someone

in a positive affectionate way, you become a true trusting friend of his, regardless of his words. But avoiding physical contact was also an important message – the lack of extensive contact between the boys and girls in the group and perhaps also because the majority were girls, created an atmosphere of sisterhood among the students, a safe environment to experience and express emotions. The group was a cozy place to be in.

Of course, different rules applied to certain groups. The smokers tended to touch one another far more than the others did. This group would also ignore the Arab males, and would even turn their heads away if they passed them in the university's corridors.

But there were those who crossed all of these boundaries, and touched everyone. David hugged, massaged, and held hands with a group of five girls he was friends with. Meirav had physical contact with all the Jews in class, but avoided the Arabs. The Arabs in class didn't have physical contact with the Jews, except for Marian who felt free enough to sit close to some of the Jewish girls – Sigal, Devine, and Anat. She also felt free to put her hand on Leon's thigh when talking, in an intimate gesture of close familiarity and friendship.

Leon, too, was careful in how and who he touched. He never touched the males in the group, and only touched certain girls in a paternal fashion. He would pat their back or hair in a heavy stroke that reminded Miriam of a horse trainer taking care of his beautiful beasts. He told the group once that he lives with four females – his wife, two daughters, and a cat, and as a result, he knows a little about women.

Miriam once talked with Devine about Leon. As far as Devine was concerned, there was nothing sexual about Leon's touching. His hugs were paternal in nature – she honestly felt like she was being hugged by her father.

"It's amazing, you know," said Devine as they had coffee together one early morning. "He can be so rude and

aggressive, but once he strokes you, you come to trust him. You're his friend, no matter what."

Miriam didn't answer. She was ambivalent about the whole thing. Deep down, she understood the potential beauty in touch, and didn't understand why religion condemned it so much. As she became increasingly exposed to physical intimacy among the secular students in class, she became more inclined to touch too. She felt an inner urge to open up to the erupting sensuality that flowed between the students in class.

"Touching is also an issue of status," said Devine, breaking her train of thought. "Low rank doesn't touch high rank and if they do, they do that very carefully, by touching their shoulder, just to attract their attention when needed, no more than that," she said.

Miriam didn't like this analysis; it turned touching into a power issue. "I think people use touch to send positive messages to one another and break down walls. It's how love flows between people, in a world that is cynical about love and sentimentality," she said hesitantly.

"I agree with you," Devine nodded. "We live in a world that has politicized and sexualized the simple act of touching" she said matter-of-factly. "What else?" she said, taking out her notebook from her bag.

"Well, girls for instance touch one another's hair," Miriam said.

"I used to do that a lot as a child. It is very pleasurable," confessed Devine, as she sipped her coffee.

"Yes. But don't you think it's slightly sexual?" asked Miriam, embarrassed.

"A little, maybe. It's more sensual than sexual I think. But for me, what's interesting is that it's permitted culturally – we girls are allowed to express a measure of sexuality and sensuality in public through playing with one another's hair. Men don't do that at all among themselves. They are not allowed to express any sensuality what so ever among themselves." "I think they express their

sensuality through playing musical instruments. At least that's how it appears to me when they play a guitar or the flute," said Miriam. They both nodded their heads in agreement.

"Shall we go to class?" said Devine, looking at her watch. "It's late, I hope Sylvia will let us in." They grabbed their bags and rushed down the stairs to the studio just in time before the door was closed.

§

That lesson, they had to perform a "personal journey"; that is, they had to act out a journey they had experienced in life. Dana was the first to volunteer for the challenge. She placed a chair with a hat on it at the far end of the room. Standing at the other end, she opened a small package, taking out an electric razor. She turned it on, filling the room with the strong threatening buzz of the machine and started walking forward, looking at it while crying, her hands shaking. Then she turned it off, and folded it back, wiping her tears. She placed her hand on her stomach, took a deep breath, and walked across to the chair, placing the hat on her head.

Although it was a puzzle to those who watched what she was crying about, and what was the significance behind the electric razor, Dana's emotions were potent in her use of that symbolically laden object. Smiling, she explained her act to the group.

"I had a good friend who was dying from cancer over a period of six months. As she lost her hair in chemo, all the female friends in our group shaved their heads in solidarity. I was the only one who didn't. So on my birthday, they gave me an electric razor." There was a long silence.

"Wow, that's unbelievable. Just when you think that life can't get any worse," Sylvia said.

"Yes, it was horrible," Dana said. "The hat is a reminder

of her. She was really a very good friend of mine and when I decided not to shave my head, I was embarrassed to visit her at the hospital.” Dana’s voice subsided. As she sat down, Dalia hugged her tenderly.

Miriam was next. She created a pyramid out of plastic cups on a large server, placed it on her head, and started to walk from one side of the room to the other. Some of the cups fell off. So she returned and organized a pyramid again and then started her path again until she succeeded. Devine was fascinated by the simplicity of the exercise. She thought it was beautiful, dealing with balance and grace, and taking on challenges, even when failure is certain. To her surprise, Sylvia didn’t like it.

“Why did you choose to depict balance?” Sylvia asked critically, with a strong tone of disappointment in her voice.

“I liked this idea,” said Miriam shyly, coming to sit with the rest.

“Theater is not about balance. People go to the theater to see tears and blood. On stage you can bring the most horrid things and it is acceptable. The only thing the stage and your audience will not accept is balance and serenity. Because there’s no drama in it. Nothing is happening. This is something good to strive for in life, but once you get on that stage, you better bring your most extreme, unacceptable intense emotions,” she said and then moved on to the next exercise.

CHAPTER 13

UTOPIA ON THE LAWN

“Hello, hello, hello,” shouted Yaniv as he entered the studio. He sat down heavily on the podium, his hands tinged with red as if he had just emerged from a murder scene.

“What’s that, Yaniv?” asked Devine and David in sheer disgust.

“I dyed my hair red this morning. What do you think?” he asked, pointing at his hair. Only then did they realize it was bright red. They laughed and moved their hands through his Marine haircut.

“Where were you yesterday?” Yaniv asked Devine.

“Oh, I was with my children,” she answered quietly, fixing her eyes on the carpet.

“There was a big scene with Abed in Leon’s class yesterday,” he said excitedly. “David decided not to include Abed and Maher in his end-of-year directing exercise because they never come to classes. Abed was offended, and he entered the studio shouting loudly about re-appropriating Palestine, turning the whole issue into something political.”

“Well, isn’t it?” asked Devine, aware of how segregated Abed felt within a Jewish group.

“No,” responded Yaniv angrily. “Think how many Arab students have graduated from this class, thriving both socially and in their acting. I tell you, the guy is full of pain. Somebody really fucked him up. After he finished talking, I asked him if he hates me. It’s as if he is carrying the burden and troubles of his people on his back. He looked upset enough to attack someone.”

Devine listened quietly, wondering how gentle Abed

could ever hurt anyone.

That day, class was tense. Abed and Maher sat at the far edge of the platform, Maher biting his lower lip like a lost child, and Abed covering his face with his hand, breathing heavily. As Leon entered, he could sense the atmosphere, and was ready for war.

Reading out the names, Leon stopped when he reached Abed. "Well, well, my dear friend, Abed, I see you have missed more than six consecutive classes. Interestingly, Maher, you have missed the same classes. I am sorry to say that as things stand, you are not invited to participate in the upcoming monologues evening," Leon said sternly. It was clear from his tone that arguing with him was futile.

"But what about the others who miss classes?" called out Maher in distress.

"It's none of your business," answered Leon sharply. "If you're not happy, you can leave right now."

"I'm not leaving. I'm staying here. I have the right to stay," said Abed, his face flushed with anger and shame.

"Very well, let's continue with the lesson," said Leon. The matter was closed.

Dalia got up to perform her prepared monologue for the following evening. She had to stop several times, as she struggled to remember her words. "I'm sorry, I forgot the text," she admitted, letting her hands fall limp on both sides of her body.

"Yes, you lose it, and the tension of the monologue does not build up into a dramatic event. An emotional state is something that accumulates, like rain clouds accumulating toward a storm."

The group listened quietly.

"It's not clear who you are, and who you are talking to," said Leon.

"How do you create someone who's not there?" Dalia asked, her hands clasped tightly.

"Acting is reacting," Leon said, then decided to show her what he meant. "Sabila, I want you to walk over to

Dalia and curse her.”

Sabila stood up and spat out “slut” with the deepest contempt she could summon. Dalia began saying her text in response to that intense emotional outburst, the words containing a stabbing sharpness. But then Leon switched seamlessly between Sabila and Saline, whose whole being was soft and flowing, and immediately Dalia’s whole attitude changed, the text coming out smooth and full of compassion.

“Wow,” Dalia said when she finished. “That is amazing. I never realized how different people trigger different emotions in me.”

“Yes. Acting is always reacting to something, even if it is imaginary,” Leon concluded.

Devine walked out of the lesson, feeling uplifted. She felt the lessons were offering her important insights into life. She was also about to let out a little steam with her dance and music group. Sivan, a student from the physiotherapy department, was the one who initiated the group which met once a week for a session. Outside on the lawn after dark, on the seam line between the forest and the university, her friends waited for her. They sat beating their drums, while others from the theater group came out of the building. Salam joined them and played the guitar until his bus arrived, followed by Marian who danced an unassuming little belly dance, and then disappeared too into the large belly of the elongated bus.

Suddenly the joyous singing and dancing were abruptly interrupted by Rachel, who approached them with wide frightened eyes.

“Do you know what just happened?” Not waiting for a response, she continued. “We are all so afraid. We just found a sign on the wall that Abed and Maher wrote. ‘To all the first-year students – *cul culb bish yomo*’ (English translation – Every dog has its day). Daria took it off the wall to show it tomorrow in class.”

“Calm down,” said Devine, amazed at how panicked

and afraid Rachel was. "It's only words," she said.

"Yes, but why are they attacking all of us? What did we do?" Rachel said and walked off angrily to catch her bus.

Shortly after, Maher and Abed came out of the building and joined them. They seemed sad and anxious. "We are so offended that we have been excluded from all the events – the monologues and the director's exercises. And it's all because of those two directors who pushed David and Leon to kick us out," said Maher, his eyebrows knitted together in fury and desperation.

"Everything is going to be fine," said Devine. "Just stop frightening people with your wall announcements," she said teasingly. "You're making everyone hysterical." Smiling, she invited Maher and Abed to join their circle. "Can you teach us to beat the drum?" she asked Maher.

He began teaching them simple patterns of drumming when Ginger, an American girl who was at the university for a short research project, joined them. She was a drummer in a Scottish folk band, and she showed them patterns of drumming which were slower than the tempo of the Palestinian *darbuka*. While the atmosphere was once again becoming merry, two Arab girls arrived in a car to pick up Abed and Maher. At first they watched in wonder the happenings on the lawn, and once they realized Maher wasn't planning to leave, they joined in.

Abed, clinging to his anger, went off to sit in the front seat of the car, watching them. One of the girls sang love songs in Arabic, full of yearning and sadness, her eyes drifting to Maher. The Jewish girls clapped their hands and tried unsuccessfully to follow the rhythm while Maher forgot all about his sorrows as he appointed Ginger to feed him a carrot while he tapped his *darbuka*, joyfully explaining things to her in broken English that kept her giggling.

Devine and the other girls began dancing wildly on the wide lawn, circling Sivan, who was wearing a belly dancing costume, with little shimmering bells and buttons that

filled the air with tingling sounds. Ruha, the Arab singer, began singing a wedding song, and before long they improvised a wedding on the lawn. Holding two candles, Ruha walked in the front, with Devine following her with an improvised veil.

“We shall have now a *Haffla* (a Palestinian banquet),” said Maher, rising to his feet, and quickly convincing Abed to join his drumming.

“We need some refreshments for our wedding,” said Sivan. Opening her bag, she took out some fresh parsley, carrots, an apple, and a bottle of mineral water.

“This is all so wonderful...” said Devine, who looked as excited as a playful puppy.

“I’m sorry, but I have to go,” said Ginger after Maher finished his carrot.

“Where are you from?” asked Maher inquisitively.

“I was born in the United States, but I currently live in Edinburgh, Scotland,” she said, beginning to walk away. “Thank you for a lovely time,” she said.

Maher was not ready to let her go yet. “But first, dear Ginger, I want to tell you that I do not approve of America’s politics, nor do I approve of how the colonial British empire has oppressed the Egyptians and the Indians!” It was clear that he saw her as a representative of both empires. Ginger smiled a forgiving smile and began walking away. “Wait,” Dorit called after her. A sweet and plump-looking girl, Dorit hugged her goodbye, then continued hugging ceremonially each and every one of them, one after the other.

Abed, surprised by the sudden hug, let go of his earlier resentment, and beamed back at Dorit. “Where are you from?” he asked her.

“I’m from a settlement in the Galilee,” she said.

“So are we – we are from villages in the Galilee,” they both said. “I live in Dir al Asad, but originally my family came from Shater,” said Maher. Dorit looked puzzled. She didn’t understand how he could be from two different

villages. "I mean before the 48 war," he said smiling. Dorit searched through her bag and found a packet of waffles and some nail varnish. They gathered up in a circle, and standing close to one another, Maher smeared their little pinkies with nail varnish. It felt like an ancient bonding ceremony and there was a peculiar sense of urgency in the air, and a happiness none of them had ever experienced before. For that short time, their differences were not something to fear or be angry about, but a source of excitement, creativity, pleasure, and conviviality. After all, they were all living under the same skies.

Suddenly the water sprinklers on the lawn erupted, soaking them. Laughing, they ran across the road to find a dry spot.

"I suggest you go and talk to Leon tomorrow," said Devine to Maher and Abed as the others left. "And stop fighting with people. Just show up for class. It's not personal – the rules about attendance and being punctual apply to everyone." she insisted. It seemed as though Devine was successful in calming them down, as they all went home looking uplifted.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE TASTE OF TRUTH

“I’m sorry for being late. I was held up by the head of the faculty. I have something to announce today,” said Leon gravely at the beginning of the Sunday class. The group immediately became quiet. He coughed dryly and said: “After a long struggle with the head of the faculty, it was decided today that several of the teachers, including myself, would be expelled.”

A heavy silence fell on the group.

“Why?” shouted Rachel, breaking the tense silence.

“I want an explanation,” she demanded, on the verge of tears. Leon, who was a respectable director and well connected in the theater world, was a major player in their dreams of having an acting career.

“I will explain,” said Leon, enjoying the effect his announcement had made, as he was not going to give up so easily and he needed their support.

“The founders of the theater department, of which I am one, have struggled to establish the acting school. You have all gone through an audition to be accepted and we took our chances, committing ourselves to your professional training, to help you realize your potential, with all the difficulty of creating a professional production with students. For reasons beyond my understanding,” he paused, choosing to omit the fact that he was under investigation after serious complaints from students and colleagues, who accused him of terrorizing the students. “We have worked very hard over the years, and now it has been decided that we are not to be involved anymore with the selection of actors or the directing.” His matter-of-fact tone concealed his deep distress.

“But why?” worried Sabila. “I don’t know,” Leon

responded innocently. “Ask *them*. I have no intention of leaving. I will fight with complete transparency,” he said.

“Who are *them*?” insisted Yaniv, sensing war and blood in the air.

“The ruling forces,” said Leon in a tone that hinted that powers greater than local departmental politics were in play here. “I am thirty years in this profession and I am not going to give up,” he concluded, and to prove his professional, back-to-business attitude, he sat down and asked them to begin the rehearsal for the second monologues evening that was to be held the day after.

§

More than the event itself, the atmosphere after the second monologues evening was something Devine found memorable. All the sexual energies that were summoned for the performance were released in the confinement of the girls’ dressing room. One of the second-year students stripped naked while shouting her text and laughing exuberantly. Sunshine stood happy in front of the mirror, making seductive faces. Seeing that, Devine laughed and made a seductive smile at herself too, filled with intense adrenalin after the night’s feat. She had given her first performance and it was wonderful. People approached her during the break telling her she had a very strong presence on stage, and that she was special. It was marvelous to be back on stage.

Anat stood by the door of the dressing room watching them with a frozen look and puckered lips. She looked as if she was ready to punch someone. “She’s envious and devastated,” Devine thought to herself, sobering up all of a sudden. It was never her intention to upset anyone.

“I’m so disappointed with all of us,” Anat exclaimed, and left the room angrily, banging the door behind her.

Every one in the room paused for a moment. “What’s

with her?” said Sunshine.

“Her monologue sucked,” said one of the other girls.

“Who cares if it’s good or not? It was so much fun doing it,” said Devine to Sunshine, trusting her to be on her side. “I was terrified when I got up there, I was shaking, couldn’t control my hands, but then as the text started rolling out, I forgot everything, and something that has been dormant for years just flowed out of me. It was like a huge surge of energy filling me, and for a moment I really felt like I was surfing on it, taking it to whichever direction I wanted: from sadness to laughter to anger.” Then she hesitated, recalling her uncontrolled outburst.

“Was I ridiculous when I shouted?” she asked nervously.

“No, you were super,” said Sunshine. “I admired what you did.”

“Thanks,” said Devine as she took off her high heels.

“I also liked what Shlomit did,” said Sunshine as she was undressing, carefree in the public space, girls coming in and out all the time. “She was so funny with all those handkerchiefs falling on the floor and her miserable sniveling desperation.”

“Yes, she was good,” agreed Devine, wishing still with all her heart that she would be the one to win the prize that evening. Yaniv hugged her outside the performance hall, telling her that she was so good, she “tore” the others to pieces. David congratulated her as well on her performance. “I’m bursting with energy,” she admitted, laughing.

Reflecting on the evening’s experience, Devine realized what an astonishing experience it was to perform again. She understood now how performing can become addictive. She recalled how she wobbled to the stage in her high heels, tense and wound up. As she reached the front stage, though, she felt as if she had entered a space which was filled with blazing light and a strange silence. She stood there for a moment sensing the quivering vibes of the audience that sat in the dark, waiting like a curious

beast with a thousand eyes. She began reciting the words, the text coming out awkwardly at first. As she reached the point where the character expresses her inner conflict, she laughed, identifying with that emotion. She began to laugh out loud as she came eye to eye with a moment of glorious truth. It was if she was only able now to experience the world in its true vividness and vitality. She instantly knew that she belonged on stage, where she could be her true self.

She poured out her intense feelings in changing rhythms, filling that dark space with her body and soul. Conquering, caressing, inviting, and whispering her passion at last. At that moment, she was a fearless and wild feline that had just been released from captivity. She felt beautiful and full of goodness, and as she glided to the end of the act, the brief moment when she admitted in the text that she was in love, so vulnerable and emotionally naked on stage, she experienced a pure, almost orgasmic, pleasure.



A couple of days later, Leon gathered them for feedback on their performances. He was well trained in giving feedback. He learned through the years to avoid emotional traps and to give straightforward comments, simple and clear. No philosophizing was his message. Now he focused on Sofia, serious-looking in her big spectacles. He appreciated her as his assistant director, but as an actress she lacked any shine.

“I think you don’t truly want to transform,” he said.

Sofia smiled dryly. “You’re right,” she answered.

“I came here to study directing and I don’t find any pleasure in acting whatsoever,” she said. He was willing to accept that. It was obvious that Sofia was not going to be an actress as there was not even a tiny measure of yearning exuding from her to be acknowledged as a performer. She

was the emotionally stable cornerstone of the group and people would come to confide in her, trusting her judgment. Yet, in spite of these shows of confidence in her, Sofia kept herself always slightly detached from the group. Her social group was somewhere else, among young Russian immigrants who study art in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

Sofia was a wizard in bureaucratic politics. Sober and rational, she navigated her way through the system without conflict or trouble. In her eyes, the actors were an unruly bunch, and their emotional outbursts, both on- and off-stage, revealed their ignorance of how things work. But she kept a close eye on some of “the smokers” who did use their status as middle class Israelis to get ahead, especially through gossip and intrigue with the production manager.

For example, they could tell a nasty lie about someone to push them out of a desired role or job. It was the name of the game. So Sofia didn’t reveal much to anyone about her personal life while keeping close to her chest the information she gathered carefully from her growing group of informants. She performed on a regular basis the persona of a pleasant, unemotional, and straightforward person. She was never overwhelmed by emotions, nor did she sing, dance, or play.

§

“Well, Salam,” said Leon, turning his attention to the tall boy who slumped down into his chair, looking already beaten by Leon’s feedback. “You worked very well this time. You are a talented young man,” said Leon respectfully. Salam, still not raising his head, nodded. “I sense you are too afraid of what people say about you, afraid of the consequences of your actions and words. I want to congratulate you because that means you truly have the

spirit of an artist. Artists usually do say the wrong thing. The trick is to live beyond the fear,” said Leon. Salam lifted his head for a moment and looked into Leon’s eyes, checking out his sincerity.

“Thank you,” Salam smiled hesitantly, then recoiled back into his defeated position.

“Artists have to spit into the well they drink from,” continued Leon. “It is their social duty to expose the wrongs of their society. We have to bite the hand that feeds us in order to express our truth,” said Leon to the group who stared at him in bewilderment.

“There are artists in this country who have been prosecuted all their lives for their opinions – Tomarkin for instance, who many have called for his blood. And why? Because he said things that shouldn’t be said, like that the religious people in this country are blackmailing secular society,” said Leon with great conviction.

“Well I don’t agree with him,” gentle Jon’s voice was heard. “I think he exaggerates things.”

“How can you say that? Tomarkin is a compulsive truth sayer!” roared back Leon.

“Why?” said Jon in a quiet voice. “Because he exaggerates things? Does that mean he says the truth?”

Leon looked deeply offended. “I know this man for many years, and he has always said important things!” he shouted.

Just before things started to get out of control, Daria said in a matter-of-fact tone: “It doesn’t matter what he says. The important thing is that he says something!”

That ended the argument and the two men leaned back in their chairs. But Leon was too upset to end it there. “A prophet speaks the truth, regardless of the consequences. His faith pushes him to speak. You can shut a man’s mouth, but in his art no one can interrupt him. There, you are the king of the world. There, you create. As actors, you create characters and bring them to life. Most people would think you are slightly crazy. They would numb you

up with medication just to make sure you sit quietly. Most people would prefer their child to pursue a 'proper' profession. It's OK to perform in school, to put on a Purim costume, but to be an actor is an obscenity."

Leon went on: "Artists are a very small group of people who continue to dream. Jewish religion treats artists as amusers: they play nice, but when the time comes to eat they send them to the kitchen to eat crumbs. They do not invite him to the table." Leon paused for a moment to look at his young, well-fed audience. "Most of the time you will not be understood. You must be willing to sacrifice your life for your truth. Totally absorbed in his art, an artist forgets about the world."

"Gogol, if you have heard of him, was totally insane and depressive to the extent that he burnt his last book; the same with Kafka who was filled with self-hatred. Kafka, who was a little clerk from Prague, was terrified of his father and above all extremely lonely. He managed to create a new world in a universe that already had everything. Artists do that because all they see is their truth and they follow it blindly."

Leon looked at them quietly. He knew most of them just didn't hear him. But he didn't care anymore. There were times when he did care, when he felt he had to sweep the whole world off its feet with his vision, but he became more realistic over the years. One or two attentive students were far beyond his expectations. He breathed deeply, then said: "We will end the session now. I'll continue next time after I come back from Russia, where I'm going to learn new ways of torturing and terrorizing you lot. Good night," he said, and got up to leave. Five girls immediately jumped up to talk with him. Patiently, he listened.

CHAPTER 15

THE FLOW OF LOVE

Quietly sitting at the corner of the studio's upper platform, observing the students socializing, Devine wrote in her field diary: "Saline loves Rachel and Sabila. Rachel loves Saline and Shlomit. Sabila loves Daria and Leon. Anat loves Dana. Dana loves Anat, Daria, and Devine. Sigal loves Devine. Devine loves Sigal. Meirav loves Daria. Billy loves Meirav and Jon. Jon loves Billy and Devine. Devine loves Jon too. Dalia loves Yaniv, Dana, and Sunshine. Gali loves her new boyfriend. David loves Miriam and Dalia. These are relatively stable and consistent networks of relations created by a variety of ways of expression. Something warm and uplifting flows among the group members, keeping the atmosphere friendly and possible to work in."

She sensed their relationships as a flow of "energy" that is non-aggressive, accepting and caring. It expressed itself through gentle and affectionate touching, smiles and mutual laughter, creating things together, mutual giving and sharing, cooperation and collaboration, sharing happiness, pain, and secrets. An ecology of love.

She paused for a moment, waving hello to Dana and Miriam who entered the studio, then turned back to her notebook. "Life in the group isn't easy. One has to sustain oneself while being exposed, vulnerable, and many times criticized. It is tough because they perform their most secret hidden shames. Their confusion. Their silent screams. In order to do that, they need, more than anything else, love. Some more, some less. But they are all, as a basic motivation for practicing this specific craft, addicts of love and affection. Some of them hide it carefully or limit their sources of affirmation to specific people; others

need it all the time, from everybody in intense and physical ways. None of them can abstain from it totally. The routine life of the group, beyond the actions of practicing theater and performance, is a constant exchange of demanding, inducing, yearning, rejecting, mesmerizing, and fascinating one another.

“For an actor, there is also a relationship of love with the audience. The more one reveals of oneself, the more captivated the audience. The audience’s pleasure stems from its identification with the true experience happening in real-time on stage, similar to the Roman audience watching life and death contests in the coliseum. The intensity of love and attention from the audience, when courageously allowing oneself to be totally emotionally naked on stage, may be described as standing under a radiant ray of brilliant light, experiencing oneself as a God-child. But if fear or self-criticism overwhelms the actor, she would be washed away by the audience’s huge wave of critical energy.

“One never reaches a safe haven. The audience is precarious and constantly changing its tastes, getting bored easily, searching for new exciting thrills to watch. Acting is the craft of sophisticated courtship with an extremely precarious lover; the actor needs to be always one step ahead of his audience.

“The stable cornerstone of the actor’s craft is his love toward his character. This is the force that keeps actors going, for better or for worse. Actors are trained to fall in love with their characters. This love has facets of erotic admiration, yearning, compassion and care. One establishes a relationship with his character through identifying and caring for her in spite of her many tragic traits. Characters are like ghosts eternally captivated in their tormented or comic states, becoming real for a moment through the actor, then disappearing. Allowing the character to take form through one’s being is an act of individual sacrifice. But this ability to surrender to the

character, as an act of service to the playwright, director, and audience, creates a sphere of human sanity and morality which protects the actor from falling into fits of megalomania, keeping him sober, humble, and capable of evolving as an artist.”

CHAPTER 16

FAITH

Yaniv and Devine drove up the steep road, passing through the thick pine forest. A cool wind filled the car as Yaniv opened the window wide. He seemed to be happy to take her with him to the weekly congregation of his Jesuit community. Devine felt more comfortable lately in her position within the group, and no longer worried what people would say about her friendship with Yaniv.

“I feel much better now that I have stopped drinking and smoking,” shared Yaniv. “Buying wine and cigarettes each day was an expensive habit. Now I can use that money for other things. Soda fills my belly nowadays.”

Changing topics abruptly, as was characteristic of Yaniv, he said: “A friend of mine has met a girl on the Internet and they decided to get married after two days. It takes me longer than that to make an online purchase.”

Devine giggled at that thought. “I admit that I don’t know much about treating girls nicely,” continued Yaniv. “I didn’t have much of a good example at home. My father was rough with my mom, filled with violence and rage, and I’m just like him. He erects walls so that nobody can get close to him. It’s scary. He works in this secret army institute, and his work consumes his whole life.”

“My responsibility is to do the spiritual work for him. In my constant prayers to Jesus I’m salvaging him. Through my physical and mental agony, I redeem my father,” he said as Devine drove up a tree-lined path leading to a beautiful white temple surrounded by an orchard. “He’s terrified of change. Changing is dying and being reborn again. He can’t even admit how distraught he is since my mother’s death. I think it’s because he’s of Polish origin and extremely introverted. Nobody knows what goes on

in his heart. It can be scary to hang around him at times. If you say something out of place he lashes at you or hits you straight in the head, knocking you down with a painful blow. I'm always on guard when I'm around him," admitted Yaniv.

His frown changed to a smile as he told Devine, "I don't feel I have to protect myself when I'm around you. I wouldn't have talked to you about these things if I did." Getting out of the car, Devine followed Yaniv to the temple.

Climbing up broad marble stairs, Devine could hear the heavy rhythm of a music band. Walking past a few elderly Russian women, they entered a large round hall, filled with an enthusiastic crowd. They were singing, some of them with their hands lifted up in the air, along with the music band, which was standing on a stage in the center of the hall. A good-natured looking woman in her late forties greeted them, helping them find a chair. Devine, slightly off-balance, shy and excited at the same time, looked at the people's flashed faces, at the ray of sun light flowing in through the large glass roof above the band, and above all, she was transfixed by the beautiful voice of the singer on stage. Yaniv, glancing over at her, enjoyed the expression of amazement and delight on her face. "That's Hanna; she's the wife of the leader of the community, Alex. He used to be an actor and a director, and then he had a revelation, after which he met Hanna and they moved from the States to found this community. They managed to build this church with donations from all over the world. Isn't it amazing?" he asked her. She couldn't answer him, as the impact of the energy in the room left her speechless. They exchanged smiles and then he moved to stand by the altar.

Falling to his knees, he kissed the altar stones and lifted his hands. His eyes were closed, only his lips signaling his prayer. Looking at him, his intensity of expression, all directed up to an invisible god, she sensed his deep

devotion and love.

She too felt overwhelmed by the music and palpable excitement in the air. She began singing, and as she realized nobody was looking at her, she closed her eyes and let her own God fill her too with the sweet, optimistic, and soothing sensation she always felt when she tapped in to that place in her being. It felt so good to be in a place where it was acceptable to believe, with music and song, without being marginalized in the ladies' section of the synagogue.

As they walked back to the car after the ceremony, Yaniv asked with passion in his voice: "Do you understand why I love this place?" "Yes I do, it is wonderful," she admitted, happy she dared to talk to Hanna who gave her a disk of her music.

"You're so lucky she gave that to you," he said. "These people have saved my life several times. They have a rehabilitation center here which I began attending after I was out of my second hospitalization. My doctor recommended their center to me and ever since they have been helping me out. They got me clean when I was totally on alcohol. They helped me clean my house of all the pornography and bad stuff I had there. They care for me even when I abandon myself. I love these people."

"That's wonderful," Devine smiled at him. He seemed so happy yet sober at that moment, as though he had recovered completely from his past experiences. Little did Devine know at that moment how short-lived that serenity would be.

CHAPTER 17

DIFFICULT RELATIONS

Walking quickly past the security guard, Devine realized how happy and uplifted she felt since her experience at the Jesuit congregation. She walked in, leaving behind her the beautiful sunny day. Entering the long gray corridor, a swarm of students walked past her in their best clothes, the girls in short minis and extravagant perfumes, the boys with their fashionable cases and preppy haircuts. University was the best place to find a husband, a date, a lay, or any kind of intimate inspiration one was looking for. That's how she had met her husband.

Her thoughts were interrupted as she met Abed by the ATM. He looked upset. "I am very worried," he said, his moon-shaped face expressing deep anguish and regret. "I was admitted into the university under the condition that I would complete the math exam by the end of the second semester, but I didn't turn up for the final test last week. Now I'm totally dependent on their mercy and if they don't let me pass, I'll need everybody to protest for me."

Devine realized that protests had an entirely different meaning to him than for her. Sigal, passing by on her way to the studio, hugged her warmly and smiled at Abed.

"What's up, Abed? Haven't seen you for a while in Leon's classes," she said warmly.

"I'm in real trouble," he said. "I need your help as a representative of the department in the students' council." He went on to describe his predicament.

"Listen, Abed," Sigal answered him firmly. "There is nothing for me to say as long as you don't attend classes and make more of an effort. I'm on probation too, just like you. I have to do the math exam as well and I struggle every day to get decent grades that will allow me to

continue.”

Realizing that the conversation wasn't getting him anywhere, Abed became quiet. He turned around and walked away to his buddies from the “village brothers.”

Devine and Sigal continued on their way, headed for the crowded café. “Am I happy to see you,” said Sigal. “I need someone to talk to. I'm upset. I have recently gained two kilos and I am beginning to think that my metabolism has changed. I'm not seventeen any more. Maybe I need to go on a diet,” said Sigal, hesitating before pouring sugar into the steaming cup.

“Have you been sitting a lot lately?” asked Devine.

“Yes I have, we had all these tests and papers to write,” admitted Sigal.

“Well, that explains it,” said Devine, who knew from personal experience the effect that long hours sitting in front of the computer had on the body.

“Maybe it's for the best,” muttered Sigal. “Maybe looking hot isn't such a trophy. A lot of men harass me because of my looks,” said Sigal. “One of the men at the mall where I work touched my breasts the other day, like he does to all the other girls who work there. But I gave him a piece of my mind. Told him to keep his hands to himself,” said Sigal angrily. “He wasn't even ashamed. He shouted back at me, ‘What a mouth you have, how dare you talk like that to me?’”

“When I was younger, I went through similar experiences,” said Devine. “I learned to hide myself. Got married as soon as I could, and I wore big clothes most of the time. Being beautiful can be dangerous,” she admitted, looking at Sigal with sympathy.

Sigal nodded her head with understanding. “I have thought about it too, I mean about wearing long tent dresses,” she said. “Would you like to join me in Iris's class?” she suggested, eager to change the uncomfortable subject.

“But I am warning you,” whispered Sigal, as she leaned in closer, “She’s a real witch. Ask anyone. She seems nice at first, but when you get to know her you find out she’s evil.”

Devine, who had heard these rumors before, decided to join her anyway.

Iris, a plump woman in her late thirties sat calmly in front of the class, talking quietly to the students. An outsider would think that this was an informal gathering of friends. She handed out a big costume book, explaining about codes of respect given to actors.

“When you begin measurements for costumes, you must always invite the leading actor first so that he doesn’t have to see the markings of someone else’s measurements on his costume,” she said. “Actors often expect costume designers to produce changes and miracles in their physical form – to transform them into people they are not,” she said smiling. “The relationships between the creators of a performance are extremely delicate and prone to misunderstandings; that’s why theater artists prefer to work with the same people over and over again through the years as they get to know each other’s sensitivities. There is, of course, a natural curiosity for new faces, but there is always a strong feeling of caution when developing a new relationship.”

Sigal kept whispering in Devine’s ear. “Look at how she slouches on that chair.” Devine was torn between agreeing with Sigal in her ridicule of Iris and being intrigued by this interesting woman. The costume book was passed from person to person until it got to Sigal, and they looked together at the beautiful designs, picking a costume they liked and sketching it in their notebooks. Sigal chose a colorful dress that covered the whole body from neck to ankle.

Devine observed the group of students who were sitting leisurely. She suddenly caught sight of Yaniv who was sitting in the corner, unshaven and with swollen eyes. She

had not seen him the entire week since they attended the congregation and now he seemed to be in his own world.

“He fell out of bed this morning,” Sabila mocked him, and the group sniggered like a pack of hyenas. Terrified of the sudden attention, Yaniv screamed, “Your eyes are frightening me,” hiding his face with his hands, then running out of the room.

Worried, Devine followed him out of the room, but he had disappeared. Giving up, she headed to the theater café to have another shot of the bittersweet dope, loving the intensity of the caffeine in her blood, reassuring her that she has enough energy and power to endure. As she sat sipping quietly from the disposable cup, she noticed Billy eating his lunch - a drenched salad from a plastic box.

He joined her while muttering: “Nothing here is serious. I want to move to a big city, maybe make it big time in America. I know I can; one day I will do it,” he said, stabbing the lettuce with his fork. “I work as a night porter at a hotel. I earn 2,000 shekels a month. That’s crap, and I am tired, all the time. It drives me crazy. My mind no longer functions.”

Devine listened to his tales of bad fortune, his anger at the university, his frustration at his studies. She tried to direct the conversation toward his own personal aspirations, but he kept jumping from one issue to another. Salad sauce dribbling down his chin, he seemed so vulnerable and sweet at that moment; she was filled with an urge to save him.

“I’m getting low grades, and I don’t know why,” he admitted. “I know I should take my studies more seriously. Work harder,” he said, then answered his cell phone.

“Hi Salam, I’m here with Devine, why don’t you join us...we are waiting for you.” Five minutes later, Salam arrived and they picked up their stuff and walked off to the large lawn, throwing their bags against the security fence. Resting on the soft fresh grass, a sense of ease fell

on them.

Salam took out his silver flute and began to play a slow intoxicating tune. They lay in silence, only listening and feeling the warm winter sun caressing them. Devine ran loose and free in the endless blue sky above her. She breathed deeply. "That's a moment of bliss," she said half to herself.

"I have begun a pantomime course," said Salam, breaking the silence. "It's cheap, only 100 shekels a month. Want to join, Billy? There are lots of hot girls there," he said teasingly, in an attempt to lure Billy to his course.

"Sure, why not?" answered Billy.

"I thought you were looking for true love," Devine teased him, recalling a conversation they had the other day.

"Yes, sure, but she better be hot," he answered back.

"But don't you know that hot girls stop being hot after a while?" she said, and they didn't answer her. Two minutes later, two older girls, in good shape, approached to listen to Salam playing. He stopped playing and they sat in silence until the girls went away.

"I don't like this place," Salam admitted. "Everybody is busy licking up to the teachers to get parts. Like in puppet class, I feel that all they want is for us to perform sexually vulgar and obscene scenes. If everybody laughs, you'll get a good grade," he said.

"It's a real pity," said Devine. "You are doing this course once in your life. Go with your gut instinct."

"I'm staying here because I want a degree," Salam said openly. Devine could identify with that sentiment. She had done exactly the same thing, sacrificing the best years of artistic talent, walking through glum corridors, toiling to get good grades, until you can't live without that kind of gratification anymore.

"I'm here because we have the third year productions that give us stage time and exposure," said Billy, serious and calculated. Devine realized she would be gone by

then, and she sighed. "Except for that, all the rest is ugly," said Salam sitting upright, his flute resting in his lap. "I was at the production office one day and some of the girls in class were slandering the designer of the new production. Why do they have to behave in that way toward someone else's art? It's disgusting," he said, as he rummaged through his bag, looking for the flute cleaner.

"Well, it's part of the theater world. People consume one another alive. That's one of the reasons I couldn't continue with my acting when I was your age," Devine said. "I couldn't stand all the gossip and slander," she said, remembering clearly her last performance in a television production. One of the leading actresses continually talked badly about her, to the point that Devine froze and couldn't act. She still saw her on the front pages of magazines, as that woman became one of Israel's prominent actresses. Devine pushed away the frustration that welled up from within her. Billy sat up and said, "It's not just in theater; it's everywhere. At the hotel, I hear people talk like that about each other too. People are constantly at each other's throats. That's just life," he said and they sat in silence.

The sun moved behind the grim tomb-like building, leaving them deserted and cold on the lawn. Slowly, they got up and moved indoors, seeking a place where Salam and Billy could practice their exercises for Leon's class. "I'm performing a soldier today," said Salam as he unbuckled his shoes, getting dressed in army uniform. In a split second, his movements changed, becoming quick and direct, without the slightest hesitation or softness he usually had. It was as if the act of dressing up had totally transformed his character.

"Two days ago, I saw a movie about the American Navy. I liked the part where the marine commander shouted in his soldier's face: 'Your ass is mine!'"

"what does 'Your ass is mine' mean?" asked Devine. Billy laughed heartily. "It means I will give you a hard time,

I will train you.”

“I don’t know,” said Devine, shaking her head. “To me, it all sounds very homosexual,” she remarked.

“Could you perform for me how a commander behaves?” she asked, sitting on the table, feeling very feminine and lovely. In a fraction of a second, Billy became a soldier too, but an aggressive one – his whole face tense, his mouth puckered, chest puffed out in pride, hands straight on both sides of his body, he started disciplining both of them. Devine laughed in total surrender at his hilarious shouting.

“Get down on your knees and do twenty push-ups,” Billy screamed at Salam at the top of his voice, who immediately obeyed. Devine watched fascinated. Suddenly Billy stopped, looking repulsed. “The thing with the army is that they work your mind in such a way that you find yourself feeling cool when they give you a Short M16. You walk around feeling proud; you yearn to point it at someone and shoot.”

Salam, getting up, nodded his head with agreement. “Yes, you do start to feel that way,” he said, remembering how proud he was to walk around in his uniform and rifle, admired by the girls in the village.

“I’m going to perform today a male waitress,” said Billy, switching quickly to a gentle waiter who talks in a soft voice. “Hey guys, the lesson is about to begin,” realized Billy suddenly and the three hurried out before Leon would close the studio’s door.

Finding a place to sit on the platforms, Sigal moved to sit by Devine and they smiled at one another. “My pants are killing me,” moaned Sigal under her breath. “They are tight all of the sudden. I hate feeling like this,” she said, then went silent as Salam began his soldier exercise. Devine watched him with great wonder as she remembered that when she had first seen him he looked like a wild Indian, a new age nature boy, and here he was transformed

into a typical Israeli soldier.

As he finished his act, Leon nodded his head. "Very well, you do try. But I don't trust you; there's something about your movement that avoids the truth. The body never lies. You're two-faced and sneaky." He spoke without flinching. Salam looked like he had been hit by an iron fist, the dreamy mood of that afternoon evaporating in one single sentence. He looked at Devine for a fraction of a second, then walked back toward his chair, avoiding the others' gaze. Leon continued, utterly unconscious of the effect his words had, and in a business-like manner said, "Well, let's move on."

§

Leon was deeply upset that afternoon. He expected more students to fight against his expulsion but they were afraid to do so. Perhaps they didn't want to make enemies in their first academic year. Maybe they felt they couldn't do anything for him as the decision had been made by high levels within the university. Maybe they wanted him out.

"This year is almost over, and I will be leaving you," Leon said, facing them. "I am deeply concerned about your submissiveness as a group, as a generation. Your generation avoids taking a stand, having an opinion. Our generation was involved in everything, not always wisely, but we kicked and fought. It is a serious problem that you are afraid to express your opinion. You cannot be an artist without a perspective on the world. I sense you are terrified of everything that is political and I believe it is because you were educated systematically to be yes men. You were not taught to ask questions, to argue with conventional truth.

"Healthy societies are ones where there are inner arguments and debates. Israel was established on people's struggles against all odds for what they believed in. There

is no one today to show society what it looks like because everybody's too meek," he said, his intense gaze filling them for a fleeting moment with a sense of purpose.

"But the issue is also professional. Actors must be like vultures seeking prey. You must be disgustingly egocentric, because only such people can create magic once they get up on stage. They cannot be nice people; they have to be egomaniacs. If you are not, you won't survive. Of course, actors can be wonderful diplomats who know how to disguise it, but in order to endure all the great embarrassments of this profession, you must have a strong ego and a great deal of self-love. You must have claws and teeth to fight your way," he said, his whole expression and bodily tension showing exactly that.

"You are teaching us to be vicious. It does not necessarily have to be so," said Maher anxiously.

"I am teaching you the rules of the game. When two lions get on stage, things get interesting because they are there to eat one another; that's the magic of theater, a struggle for life and death at each moment. It is not a course in niceness. Great actors are dangerous. Think of Jack Nicholson, who radiates the danger of a wild beast. They have some kind of gleam in their eyes, an insanity that is fascinating to follow and watch..." Leon stopped to gauge the effect of his words on his students.

Devine was listening, her heart pounding faster with each minute. She felt like every word of his was filling her with an increasing desire to perform. "I have seen many actors who were very nice," said Jon, resisting. "Perhaps, but if you push the wrong button, the fierce animal comes out. Take what I say and work with it. When you come out of here, who do you think is going to wait for you? In the Israeli theater market there are numerous young people that will wish that you die a quick death because they are scared you will get their part. Eighty percent of all actors are unemployed. There is no work, just as it is in England and the States," he said, passionately looking into their

eyes, sensing their fear. He took a breath and paused.

"I don't think it necessarily has to be like that," said Dalia in a small voice from the upper platform. "I think theater is a group effort and as such people have to help one another and be kind. I think it's against the collective interest to be as you described."

"It's OK to express your intensity and madness while performing," she continued, "but when you are off-stage, to be professional is to be decent," she said, her voice quivering.

"Go on Dalia," Leon encouraged her. "I appreciate people who speak up and say what they think."

She hesitated for a moment, then said: "Well, I have taken great care all through the year to help others, be fair, encourage, and support as many people as I could in this group." Looking around at her group, she was rewarded with encouraging smiles. "Yet still, at the same time, I worked hard on each monologue, and I have won two prizes in a row – without pushing anyone," she concluded.

"Dear Dalia, you do work very hard, and deserve all the trophies you received, but you haven't met the real world yet," he said, moving his hand through his thick white hair.

"There's no solution to this argument," called out Miriam from her place by the far wall. "It's two modes of being and surviving in the world, in society, with no resolution to it. It's a choice one has to make for oneself," she said, pulling her socks up.

Leon, sensing there was nothing more to be said, moved on to the next exercise which was performing a person at his or her profession.

Sabila got up to perform. She covered the black shiny floor with white sheets of paper and opened a set of acrylic colors. Painting slowly and systematically a long stripe of blue from the far corner downwards, she began to talk in a low deep voice: "My name is Dror. I started painting at a late age because I didn't have the courage to start earlier. Art is everything to me. I can paint all day

without taking a break. It is a dance, a ritual, a meditation for me. It is my point of meeting my higher power. I was afraid to allow myself to do this for many years; only after I divorced did I start. But surprisingly, I began immediately to sell my pictures," she paused and looked at Devine for a split second. "I don't charge much; I do it by the meter, because I don't feel good with charging much from young couples." The group was fascinated by the motion of her painting hand and her hypnotic voice. "She's doing art therapy," whispered Toni to Marian.

After Sabila ended the scene, she sat down to explain her performance. "Something new happened to me," she said, her usual cold demeanor cracking into a vulnerable smile. "All my life I performed images I had in my mind and usually they turned out to be caricatures of what I intended. But this time, I tried to express my love for Dov, who is a good friend of mine. I realized how much I love him while doing it. I had fallen in love," she said, looking timidly at Leon.

"Good, very good," he said. "Usually you perform characters who are filled with anxiety. This time I saw something with a different rhythm and a specific identity. You became one with this Dov; you had no criticism against him," he said, then looked at the group. "You must remember that you are the only representatives of your character; you must love her dearly."



"Devine," Yaniv cried out to her as she was leaving the studio on her way home. "Yes, how are you?" she asked, relieved to see he was looking better. "Great," he said smiling his big feline smile. "Three new wonderful things have happened to me. The first is that I still don't drink. The other is that I got a part in the new production with the temporary director they brought in. I am going to perform an old female widow! Isn't it great?" he asked wait-

ing like a child for her affirmation.

“Super. Wonderful. I am very proud of you!” she said smiling at him faintly.

“I am happy you are, mommy Devine,” he said.

“I’m not your mother!” she said feeling sick as if he had cursed her. Damn, she was only four years older than him. “Well, *sister* Devine, whatever,” he said going on, “and, this is the big one, I’m in love...I have been dating Sivan, you know her, from the plastic arts department. Isn’t it wonderful?”

She numbly nodded her head. “Yes sure, I wish you the best of luck. Listen I have to rush home. Have fun. Take care. See you...” she said, trying her best to bury her affection for him deep within her.

Driving her car on the dark road leading home, windows closed, she screamed till her throat ached. She was tired of this field work. She wanted to be back at her desk writing, out of the world’s reach. Tired of her emotions being so exposed, she felt everything with a sharp intensity. She hadn’t felt as awake in years, but along with the intoxicating pleasure of performing came a pain that was unbearable. An itching restlessness that she wished would end.



Two weeks later, Devine received a phone call from Yaniv who sounded distraught. He wanted to know if she was coming to Leon’s class as he had something important to talk about. He looked deeply disturbed when he entered the studio that afternoon. The studio was under construction for a director’s exercise, with scenery of a Spanish front yard erected. Seeking privacy, Devine and Yaniv went to sit behind it, finding a spot under the seemingly unstable support beams.

“What happened?” Devine asked, worried.

“I had a psychiatric evaluation test today, to get back my driving license. The psychiatrist asked me all kind of questions, and I couldn’t lie. I told him I was hospitalized and that I had taken drugs in the past. By the end of the interview, he was really hostile,” he said.

Devine looked at him, inspecting his unshaved face and crumpled clothes. “You should have shaved, looked presentable, and not be so forthcoming with the truth,” she said soberly. “But never mind, I guess you are not ready yet to drive again.”

“What?” he shouted. “Not ready? I go back and forth by bus every day; I’m fed up with it.”

“Well, we all fuck up things every now and then; I do too,” she said, trying to calm him.

“It doesn’t interest me the slightest bit that you fuck up sometimes too. I want my driving license back. I hate you. I hate all of you,” he shouted at the students who were working on the scenery. For a moment Devine was afraid he would become violent. But he just left.

She called him that night but his line was disconnected. Repeatedly, she tried communicating with him, but it was as though he had erased her out of his life. For two weeks he didn’t attend classes. She heard about him from the others in the group who worked with him on the theater production.

“He’s behaving very weird lately,” said Dalia as they were sitting in the cafeteria at twilight. “He’s getting into these awful depressive moods, infecting everybody with his apocalyptic speeches. We all try to avoid being close to him so as not to be affected.”

“He talks a lot about feeling his mother’s spirit within him,” recalled Dalia after a moment’s silence. She was usually on good terms with him, but this was too much for her.

A week later, Devine received a frightening text message from him: “You shall not keep a witch alive.” For several days after that, more dark messages arrived on her cellular.

She wasn't the only recipient; there were other girls getting these messages as well. A rapist was reported on the radio to be wandering in the city, and the girls were terrified that it was him. A few did not come to the university in fear he might attack them. On the production, Yaniv terrified the cast, screaming his text or falling at the main actress's feet, kissing her crotch.

The production manager brought a guard to keep him away and he disappeared. Devine called his father and the police began searching for him. After a couple of days he was found roaming the beach. The rapist was caught too, in a different location. It turned out that Yaniv had stopped taking his medication.

§

A month later Devine came to visit him. There was a fundamental change in his home, perhaps because the apartment was repainted white and a small singing bird twittered merrily in a cage on the bookshelf. A gift from the Jesuit community. Yaniv, who had lost considerable weight, looked vulnerable and fragile.

"Tell me, Devine, what do you really think about me?" he asked faintly, sitting on the edge of his chair. Devine paused for a long moment. What could she say to him? Should she expose herself and tell him more about her own downfall, her struggle for sanity? Could he be trusted? That's the little I can do for him, she decided. She looked at her hands.

"Listen Yaniv, I think I know what you are going through."

"How can you? You have never lost your mind, been hunted by fearful images, and thoughts."

"Yes I have. I have gone through mental crisis just like you. I was hospitalized three years ago for having delusional thoughts. I know the terror you are experiencing. I was so afraid I ran away from my husband and children.

I was certain that evil forces were overcoming the world...I thought there were microphones hidden in the walls...I was so afraid and lonely then. I did not believe anyone can understand or help me. But listen, Yaniv, you are not alone. I understand you. I know that what you think feels so real that no one can make you doubt it. But Yaniv, we are captivated by our thoughts. And we must find a way out through the maze our own mind has created. It may take years, but I do believe there is a way out...to freedom. I am struggling every day to liberate myself, relentlessly. I'm learning to heal myself, and so can you..." she paused, touching his hand lightly. "You are at the bottom of the pit now, which is a great place to start. I'll help you as much as I can," she said, feeling frail and shaky herself. Could she really handle his suffering on top of her own?

"I knew you were crazy just like me," smiled Yaniv victoriously. There was no compassion in his tone.

"So that's why you're not raising your children, right?"

"No," she stammered. "I share custody...I do raise them, only it's part of the time..."

There was a heavy silence for a moment, broken by the bird's song.

"Which medication do you take?" he continued, seeming slightly more uplifted.

"I don't want to talk about this," she said. "It doesn't matter...didn't you hear what I said?"

"So tell me, is Devine your real name?" he continued, undeterred.

"I was given this name by the spirits. I'm a star-child, chosen by god. A gifted being..."

"Sure," he said, lighting himself a cigarette and leaning back in his chair, looking at her with a wicked twinkle in his eye.

"I need to go..." she said, heavily getting up, feeling weary. "Goodbye Yaniv, take care," she said, closing the door behind her. That was the last time she saw him.

CHAPTER 18

CATHARSIS

In her usual survival mode, Devine pushed her painful interaction with Yaniv to the back of her mind. Her field work was almost over and she still had to perform on the last monologues evening. This time she began preparing early, wiser than she was before.

She explored the points of interface between her own pain and that of the character. Their common denominator was clear. The heroine, Jacky, abandoned her baby to the care of her mother so she could continue with her artistic career. Like Jacky, she too had given her children to others during her mental crisis. Even if she was absent just for a short time, she could still identify with Jacky's regret and guilt. They had both lost time as mothers, a bonding that couldn't be regained with their child. She felt a huge drive to expose her suffering, to reveal all her torment over the mistakes that cannot be mended.

On the afternoon of the monologues contest, she read the text again just to keep it fresh and lively in her mind, and then she enjoyed a long shower. She meditated and quietly packed the character's clothes, a bohemian, loosely draped black dress, and a small picture of her daughter being held by her ex-husband's mother. She knew she had to stay focused, and not lose the depressive and painful state of mind her character experiences. Driving to the university, she held on to her sadness like a precious jewel. Entering the performance hall, she sat at the far end of the hall, avoiding the others, careful not to be tainted with their excitement, anxiety, and competitiveness.

The evening began with some speeches. A grim cloud hovered over the crowd as Leon departed from the students, thanking them for the meaningful years he had

as a teacher and a director at the department. As he wished them all success with their careers, one of the teachers protested loudly against his expulsion. Getting off stage, a few students hugged him and tears were shed. The other students just continued sitting, not moving this way or another, either careful or indifferent.

Devine, observing it all from her back seat, allowed the mood of her character to color it all in theatrical colors. She had come to care for Leon, with his complex persona. She wondered about how emotions tie us to people, at times when it wasn't the most rational and politically suitable thing to feel. One of her teachers once said that emotions can be used to "chain" people to one another – politicians and leaders learn to use it. It was sad to see him leave a place he had cared and worked for in such forced circumstances yet it seemed somehow appropriate as he was a true lion, and as such, he departed in a great battle.

Returning to her own project, she pulled out the photograph. Carefully examining the details. Her baby daughter in her grandmother's arms. The decisive expression on the woman's face. With the visual trigger oozed out the memories - the terrifying experience of battling over the children's custody, waking up every morning with the horror that they might be taken away from her. The helplessness she felt facing her vengeful husband.

These thoughts, like little invisible keys to inner doors, aroused a huge wave of pain within her. She sustained the peak of that sensation, until her cue was given to get up on stage. She moved through the dark space like a black leopard shooting for its prey; the blazing light on stage was warm and inviting. And when she was up there, she knew she was home. Everything was going to be just fine. She could say now whatever she had to say, revealing all the intensity of pain she experienced during that time.

She began, the text coming out on its own accord, full and round. She spoke for her character and for herself,

simultaneously involved and detached. A third eye, an inner higher consciousness, looked at her from aside, controlling and guiding her, like a two-headed creature. She pushed herself decisively to the point where she lost control. As Jacky revealed those nights after her child was gone, hopelessly searching for her in the dark, Devine released her inner pain, and a long howl, a tormented beast's cry, gashed out of her chest, shaking her entire body, flooding the performance hall like a huge torrent.

She paused and there was a complete stillness. The stage and the space of the large hall were sustained in a moment that was outside the space of time. She felt as though a wide void had opened in front of her and she could choose to drift away if she only chose to do so. But some sober, realistic bell gonged inside her and she ended her text followed by the massive applause. Returning to the sphere of everyday gravity, she realized her limbs were shaking and that she could barely walk back to her seat. She felt bare as she sensed many eyes following her. Needing to hide under a heavy blanket, she was grateful for the laws of theater, always in a flow, as the others continued doing their monologues, forgetting all about her moment of exaltation.

It was interesting for her to observe that after the great catharsis, something in her calmed down. She sensed she was ready to end her field work. It was time to close down and return home. Sitting with the other students, waiting for the judge's verdict on the evening's winners, she realized that she had enough. The desire to be an actress dissipated and a new craving emerged to find peace and to be anonymous again.

Finally the winners were announced. To her great pleasure, she had won the second prize and even received a monetary prize. "I guess those were my fifteen minutes of glory," she confessed to Miriam as they walked out to the dark parking lot. "A fleeting moment of bloom. The end of my youth and the beginning of something new,"

she said, experiencing a mixture of sadness and curiosity.

“I must disagree with you,” said Miriam. “Human beings bloom several times in one lifetime, and so will you.”

“Well, only time will tell,” smiled Devine, embracing the younger woman lovingly, then walked away to her car. Miriam stood on the pavement waving her goodbye as she drove off, looking back through the front mirror.

A MONOLOGUE: WEAVING EMOTIONS
– HOW THEATER ACTORS LEARN TO
WILLFULLY AROUSE EMOTIONAL STATES
(AUGUST 2008)

My name is Ayelet. In Hebrew, it means the first rays of breaking dawn. As a student and practitioner of cultural anthropology for the past 12 years, all my studies have been conducted in Israel. As difficult as it is for me to accept, I am “an endotic anthropologist,” someone who conducts research in her own culture. Anthropology has always struck me as being the science of the brave who leave their homes, traveling to far and exotic places where there are incredible cultural differences between them and the natives. Yet here I am, in my homeland, Israel, living for the past five years in Naharia, a small border town on the northern coast of Israel. Living here has a sense of fatality to it. At the end of almost every day, I look out of my window at the beautiful endless, almost dark, sky, grateful that for the time being, no missiles have fallen on us.

Sometime around August 2007, I decided to revise my first paper that was to be published in an academic journal. At that time, I aspired to have a position at the university where I hoped to conduct research and write for as long as I wished. Luckily, the paper got through the review stage, but six months later, and I was still too terrified to work through the comments.

It was almost noon when I entered Carter Café, a small coffee shop on the main street in the city center. The heat and humidity outside were unbearable so I decided to work in the comfort of the high quality air-conditioned kosher dairy café. Removing my sunglasses, I looked around me, assessing the café. This was the first time I

had been there since it was renovated following last summer's missile attack.

I chose a chair by the window. The café was filled with wonderful scents of freshly ground coffee. The blazing light outside flooded in through the windows. A waiter with sensitive blue eyes and a two-day grown beard brought me a large, generous cappuccino. I opened my laptop, and as I began reviewing the paper, I felt totally overwhelmed by all the things I had to consider, clarify, and refine. I felt tiny and insignificant. A little Israeli scholar far away from where real things happen. I felt that I couldn't ever write in "their language" – that anonymous group of anthropologists across the ocean that I imagined were effortlessly conducting exotic research. I feared there was no place for my truth, my voice. "How will I ever manage to get through this?" I mumbled to myself desperately, holding my head between my hands.

Self-disparagement was not my only barrier. There was also talk of a new war starting soon and it was hard for me to shut out the reality of our lives and dive into the depth of the paper. But my hard-earned discipline paid off at that moment, as I lifted my head and began reading the text:

"I'd like to depict in this paper how theater actors learn in the process of their training to willfully arouse emotional states within themselves as a means to affect their audience. The theoretical goal of the paper is to provide instances where culture produces open-ended practices for molding emotions. In recent years, a number of important scholars have dealt with the issue of emotional agency and the ability to control one's emotional states. William Reddy suggested the notion of "emotional navigation," contending that individuals have the capacity to navigate and contain one's emotional impulses within cultural scripts (Reddy 2001). The management of emotions was also described by Arlie

Hochschild (1983) who, in order to explicate the emotional experience of air stewardesses, used the notion of “emotional work” to describe the ability of individuals to willfully change the quality and intensity of their emotions according to cultural laws of emotion (Hochschild 1983). These cultural laws form complete sets, certain “characters” which individuals strive to perform with deep and total conviction in order to be accepted by the group. Eyal Ben Ari in his ethnography about Israeli army soldiers (Ben-Ari 1998) described how the army ethos demands that soldiers develop a certain demeanor, exhibit physical and emotional restraint and the ability to act with confidence, as well as calmly deal with difficult and life-threatening situations. The soldier trains in this case to control impulses and feelings of fear, terror, and panic. Different forms of emotional control we find in other cultures as well where emotions such as equanimity and peace are valued (Wikan 1990; Hoolan 1992) or the Mayonnane in the Amazonas who believe that “negative emotions” should be transformed into “positive ones” as part of creating a good life (London-Sulkin 2000). Wolkomir and Schrauwers also point out how religious groups create a process of self-improvement through emotional work (Wolkomir 2001; Schrauwers 2002).

“In this paper, I describe cultural practices of inducing and arousing emotional states. Contrary to those cultural practices just mentioned, I present a cultural system that is directed at unleashing emotions, willfully arousing them, allowing them to be openly expressed and even amplified. In that sense I would like to bring forth an example of how cultural practices liberate the individual, presenting her or him with an acceptable medium of emotional liberty.

“The term “emotion” itself is relatively new, approximately 200 years old. It means in Latin “*Emovere*,” “to move out,” to migrate, “to transport an object,”

suggesting a mode of force to move something, intentionally. Until the 18th century, the word “passion” was the word used, from the Latin term “*passus*” meaning to “suffer,” in order to describe the intense pain and loss of control one experiences when one feels. A person was perceived to be seized by his or her passions, losing control (Lindholm 2001). The gradual change of terminology from emotional experience as loss of control to perception of emotions as a force that can be governed expresses the development of western cultural ideas and knowledge (such as psychology and psychiatry), which strive to mold the individual’s emotional experience through diverse modes of intervention. Our emotional world is a frontier on which culture and the scientific disciplines are trying to engineer nature. Nature in this case is within us – the wild landscapes of our soul that become, over time, increasingly more domesticated, governed, and controlled by either a highly conscious subject or, in other cases, induced medication.

“Returning to the phenomena of emotional experience, I would like to carefully propose that the “natural” aspect of emotional experience, especially in the case of “emotional events,” resembles a climatic event – rain, thunderstorms, hurricanes, volcanoes. Natural eruptions of various kinds. It’s an emotional state that builds up, as an electric charge discharges and disappears quickly. An accumulation of an inner force (perhaps the Freudian term of “libido” would best describe it) and its discharge against some form of resistance (people, events, arousal of the senses). It’s very different from moods and feelings, which are more enduring. I witnessed this during my field work, when actors would get up on an empty stage, with nothing really around to trigger an emotional state, and at a certain moment, while saying out loud a chain of words, performing certain movements in space, wearing certain clothes, a strong physical and mental event could be detected – tears rolled, screams erupted,

voices that quivered, all signs of a deeper, overwhelming event. Some very strong energetic force moved through the actor's body, breaking its way out.

"As I wish to present in this paper, it is possible to arouse such an event willfully. The verb that best depicts this ability is "weaving," by which one systematically creates the necessary conditions for an emotional event to occur. It brings to mind the way a spider spins his web to catch a fly. This art of "weaving" an emotional state is what theater actors learn to do during their training.

"The subject matter of theater is human experience with all its diversity. The craft of the actor is to express that experience effectively. As a result, theater actor training becomes a space in which one can gain a clear and focused picture of emotional experience and expression, highlighted and separated from the ever-flowing stream of everyday life. Hastrup, (1998) who writes about the actors' craft, points to their ability to reach various emotional states upon willful decision. Hastrup describes how an Odin theater actress discovered that she could "turn on the switch" and be completely present during a rehearsal, "be in the now, in the action and burning in it" (Hastrup 1998:38-39). This is an example of how an actor learns to enter a lively emotional state.

"I explored these issues by participating with and observing a group of theater students at an Israeli university during their first year of training. A Bachelor's degree required an actor, in his or her first year, to take two acting courses as well as many other classes and academic courses. Their training consisted also of participating in the productions of the theater department, which was the highlight of acting training. During the first and second years of training, the actors performed short monologue evenings, which were competitive, while in the third year they performed full-

length productions presented before a wide audience.

“Most of the first year’s training was based on individual exercises, emphasizing and developing the actor’s ability to create emotional states without external incentive. The actors prepared their exercises on their own, receiving feedback from the group after they showed them in class. Innovation, individuality, and expressivity were key values. Expression of emotions was perceived as a challenge, and required much courage and persistence. When an actor experienced an emotional event, it was mostly rewarded by kindness, interest, and awe.

“Throughout the year, it became clear that depression and lack of emotionality were perceived as inappropriate emotional states. “*We want to see tears and blood,*” demanded Michel, the acting teacher. “*Anything that doesn’t touch you personally does not work for you,*” she said over and over again (Michel, Teacher, field diary 62,1). Now, the students who have been culturally conditioned to restrain certain emotions had to start expressing them openly in order to “become an actor.” The students were not asked to express “love” or “anger,” but to be open, to become “*a lubricated pipe for emotions to flow out*” (Michel, Teacher, field diary 72,6). The work of the actor is to construct the right conditions for an emotional experience to be aroused and expressed.

“Weaving Emotions”

It is interesting how writing is similar to swimming in the sea: after you push your way through the crushing waves by the shore, you reach the point where you can just swim pleurably through calm waters. For the past four days, I have been able to write with great ease. Sitting in my small office at home, the fan stirring my papers, forcing me to place different objects on top of them, I am swimming with long, determined strokes.

The question which I’ll try to address now is *how* actors

arouse such emotional states willfully. The major tool for creating such a state is by forming meaningful relatedness. Relatedness to others (it may be any kind of entity) is the source and means by which emotions flow. As Winnicott proposed, our first experience of relatedness is to our primary caregivers. As humans develop and grow, they begin to use “transitional objects” on to which they have the capacity to project their emotions towards their preliminary caretaker (Winnicott 1971). Forming emotional states willfully works when relatedness is constructed and projected onto symbolic and even imaginary entities, such as words and ideas, objects and substitutes of various kinds. The path to willfully arousing an emotional state is through gradually introducing the text and ideas in the world, until they are sensed as real, as having a factual existence of their own toward which the actor has developed a strong sense of relatedness. I shall now present a few techniques used to form this systematic “object relations”:

The first step toward creating an emotional involvement is by learning as much as possible about the character, the situations in which she is placed and her relationships with others. The emotional basis needed for this process is love, acceptance, and understanding. Meir, the theater teacher and director, demanded on several occasions that the students would “fall in love with the character”:

You must fall in love with the character. If you wouldn't love her with all your heart, who will? You are her only representative; you give this spirit a body. I love the character and based on that I begin to act. I become one with the character. You mustn't judge the character (Meir, Teacher, field diary)10,6).

Loving and withdrawing judgment against the character are the first principles that enable a “suspension of disbelief” to occur; the gradual dissolving of the divide

between the actor, as a living human being, and the character, a non-existent, abstract, a construct of the creative mind. Suspending disbelief allows the actor to be totally absorbed in the illusion of the theater, as though it is a reality where one truly feels and suffers. Creating an emotional bond with an abstract object begins with the process of imagining it and inventing it as a real being. This process is not a simple one. The actor's identification with the character entails a measure of ambivalence, as well as an emotional duality of love and repulsion caused by the fact that the character may represent a part of feeling suppressed in everyday life because of cultural prohibitions. In the right emotional-political atmosphere (one that encourages free expression), the intimacy which the actor formed with the character (through learning about her) opens the possibility of unleashing these inner restraints as one now performs someone who is-not-me. Someone else.

One example of such a process is Diana's monologue. Diana, who at the time of the field work was 21 years old, spoke with great passion about almost everything with direct flaring black eyes while her sensitive hands signaled her words in the air. As the child of a well-known actor in Israeli theater, Diana breathed theater from the moment she was born. She was an urban middle class Christian Arab, though she perceived herself as a secular, cosmopolitan feminist and Palestinian. She worked for her living and dreamed of being an art therapist. On stage, she moved with a rare freedom of expression and confidence. On the first monologue night she won first prize for performing Abigail from the play "The Crucible" by Arthur Miller (1969). As we sat in the small patio café at the university, she shared with me her feelings for Abigail, the character she performed:

I loved Abigail very much. I wanted to know her. I don't justify her but I loved her rebellion – she rebels all

the time. And I have something of this in my life too. I rebel too – I rebel by loving a Muslim, by being secular and not believing in god, by smoking while other girls don't smoke. I rebel by staying late at night with friends when my society does not accept this. Abigail is like me. On the other hand, I wouldn't run away with the money like she did, because I rebel with a principle and not because I hate people. I fight for my principles while she fights for her passions (Diana, field diary 8,7).

As Diana speaks about Abigail, the abstract character sounds like a real human being with whom she has a relationship. Creating a bond between the actor and the abstract character involves a process of comparison, finding points of resemblance and difference through which develops a gradual state of identification.

The ability to form relatedness develops from seeking the character's "secrets," knowing her points of weakness, power, beauty, and derangement:

When you work on a realistic character, search under the mattress for the inner conflict, for pain. Double dimensioned character is not suitable for theater. Even if you are going to perform Hitler, find more information about him, his points of weakness, the barrier that stands between him and the world (Michel, teacher, field diary 95,6).

Unraveling "secrets," as well as finding out the "inner barriers," involve a process of concretization. The character becomes real as she hides something, as she erects a barrier between herself and the world. These form the "skin" of a virtual entity gradually coming into existence. The process of object relations formation goes a step further: the actor is realizing what are the object relations that the character has with her own social environment; what does she project onto the world,

what is she ashamed of. It is a process of weaving the character's "inner" map and web of psychological meanings, similar in a sense to sketching the patches of black and white on paper – the scars, the dribbling skin, signs of time and pain, until the portrait becomes almost real and filled with expression by the particular tension between light and shade.

Further weaving of relatedness and connection between the actor and his character as a means of forming emotional states is achieved through the actor's exploration of his own relevant painful or joyful experience. One's sorrow and emotional memories become instruments mobilized to experience the character's emotional world. A major method to arouse such emotional states was the use of emotionally laden objects.

An example of such use was when Adi broke into tears as she was holding a razor she had turned on during an exercise. Later she shared:

During my army service I served in the 'Nahal'.¹ My best friend became sick with cancer and she lost her hair because of the treatments. The other girls in the Gar'een (the core group) shaved their heads to show support for her suffering. But I refused. I loved her very much but I would not. So, they gave me a razor for my birthday. They demanded that I cut my hair. They were angry with me (Adi, interview).

The razor (its form, sound, and function) aroused an emotional memory encapsulating a mixture of feelings – love, guilt, anger, hurt, fear – which, when triggered, flows like water running from a faucet. The mere

1 A form of army service that involves service within a kibbutz. This form of service is performed with a group of peers who contribute in diverse ways to the local community life.

activation of a razor – its noise, its potential to cut away soft, long feminine hair and identity – rehashes the memory of the dear friend’s sickness and imminent death and the troubling doubt that maybe one should have done it, if only for the sake of belonging and supporting.

It must be emphasized that the emotional event described above occurred when it was performed in front of an audience. The intensity of the visible emotional experience stems not just from the emotional memory but also from the actor’s testimony in front of a “group.” The presence of an audience and the wish to communicate inner states invite or perhaps demand that the actress fully experience the emotions rather than bury them under the mask of civility.

In conclusion, the acting techniques described in this paper are not the only ones. There are numerous methods in western theater of arousing emotional states – whether by physical or psychological means. Exploring emotional work within theater training has allowed me to highlight some cultural practices that deliberately arouse emotional experience, as opposed to cultural practices of self-restraint intended at hiding one’s strong emotional state behind a cultural composure of dignified serenity, politeness, or “cold spirit.” I perceive theater actor training as a set of cultural practices that have developed in the west in order to arouse extreme emotional states. As paradoxical as it may sound, it is a discipline of emotional liberation that cultivates individuals who know how to play with their inner world as an artistic craft.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1986. *Veiled Sentiments*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ben-Ari, Eyal. 1998. *Mastering Soldiers: Conflict, Emotions, and the Enemy in an Israeli Military Unit*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Brook, Peter. 1998. *Threads of Time: A Memoir*. London: Methuen.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. New York: Routledge.
- Carnicke, Sharon Marie. 2000. "Stanislavsky's System: Pathways for the Actor," in *Twentieth Century Actor Training*. Hodge Alison. (Ed). London and New York, Routledge, pp. 11-36.
- Goodman, Geoff. 2002. *The Internal World and Attachment*. London: The Analytic Press.
- Hastrup, Kirsten. 1998. "Theater as a Site of Passage – Some Reflections on the Magic of Acting," in *Ritual, Performance, Media*. Hughes-Freeland, Felicia (ed.). London: Routledge.
- Herzfeld, Michael. 1985. *The Poetics of Manhood: Contest and Identity in a Cretan Mountain Village*. Princeton: Princeton University press.

Hochschild, R. Arlie. 1983. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hollan, Douglas. 1992. "Emotion Work and the Value of Emotional Equanimity Among the Toraja." *Ethology* 31(1):45-56.

Holand et al. 1998. *Identity and Agency in Cultural worlds/Worlds*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. 1958. "The Efficiency of Symbols." In *Anthropologie Structurale*. pp. 213-234. Paris: Plon.

Leavit, John. 1996. "Meaning and Feeling in the Anthropology of Emotions," *American Ethnologist*. 23(3): 514-539.

Lindholm, Charles. 2001. *Culture and Identity: The History, Theory and Practice of Psychological Anthropology*. New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education.

Londono-Sulkin, Carlos. 2000. "Though It Comes as Evil, I Embrace It as Good: Social Sensibilities and the Transformation of Malignant Agency Among the Muianane." In *The Anthropology of Love and Anger*. Joanna Overing and Alan Passes, eds. London: Routledge.

Marshal, Lorna & Williams, David. 2000. "Peter Brook: Transparency and the Invisible Network" in *Twentieth Century Actor Training*. Alison Hodge (ed.). London and New York. Routledge, 174-190.

Mattley, Christine. 2002. "The Temporality of Emotion: Constructing Past Emotions." *Symbolic Interaction* 25(3): 363-378.

Miller, Arthur. 1969. *The Crucible: A Play in Four Acts*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Mitter, Shlomit. 1992. *Systems of Rehearsal: Stanislavski, Brecht, Grotowski and Brook*. London: Routledge.

Overing, Joanna. & Passes, Alan. (eds.) 2000. *The Anthropology of Love and Anger: Aesthetics of Conviviality in Native Amazonia*. London: Routledge.

Rebhun, L.A. 1993. "Nerves and Emotional Play in Northeast Brazil," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 7(2): 131-151.

Reddy, Willima. 2001. *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rosaldo, Z. Michelle. 1980. *Knowledge and Passion – Ilongot Notions of Self and Social Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. 1992. *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Schrawers, Albert. 2002. "Sitting in Silence: Self, Emotion and Tradition in the Genesis of a Charismatic Ministry." *Ethos* 29(4): 430-452.

Swidler, Ann. 2001. *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wikan, Unni. 1990. *Managing Turbulent Hearts: A Balinese Formula for Living*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Winnicott, Donald. 2005. *Playing and Reality*. London and New York: Routledge.

Wolkomir, Michelle. 2001. "Emotion work, Commitment, and the Authentication of the Self." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 30(3):305-334.

Wolford, Lisa. 2000. Grotowski's Vision of the Actor. In *Twentieth Century Actor Training*. Hodge Alison ed. London and New York: Routledge.

Dr. Ayelet Abraham is a cultural anthropologist, an author, and a multimedia artist. Continuously evolving, she has created three one-woman performances, conducted several field works in Israeli settings, and is currently facilitating individual's personal growth through creative experience and expression. For more information about her work, visit: www.ayeletabraham.com.



