

BENJAMIN LAUTERBACH

*Translated by Kristof Magnusson and Hugh Ferrer*

## *Nahariya*

Shani steered with her left hand, the cell phone in her right. The street dug itself into the hills in front of us, Jesus Hills, I thought, and Shani said: “Mother, why won’t you ever listen! Don’t worry yourself!” Then she hung up. I looked out of the passenger window, the roadside shrubbery bursting with tossed-up flowers. The fields behind had wrapped themselves in translucent foil. In front of the horizon, exploding the symmetry, a shack clad in corrugated iron. It was ten o’clock in the morning, the sunlight fell low through the windscreen and forced sweat onto my skin, and Shani, who had been driving all the way from Jerusalem, pinned her phone under her left thigh and said: “Mother is nervous.” I just stared at the hills that were slowly growing into mountains and did not say: so am I. Again and again we went through little communities that arrayed themselves like pearls on a necklace. Merchants sat on stools before storefronts as big as garage doors where clothes hung, carpets and flags; everywhere, always flags. At one intersection Shani had to brake very suddenly, cursed, and in that lurch forward I grabbed the cell phone in the side pocket of my backpack: still no call, no message.

I didn’t know anything about Israel, not even after three weeks in Jerusalem. I knew the Holy Sepulchre, the Wailing Wall, the al-Aqsa Mosque only as a threatening dome rising above roofs millennia old. I knew the Goethe Institute, the Hillel Café, and the fear of further bombings. Lonely-Planet-knowledge, until I saw Shani on the steps of the Mahane Yehuda Market and began talking to her. In the first days we only spent a few afternoon hours together. “Tomer never comes back from work before eight p.m.,” Shani said, “but I don’t accidentally want to run into him when he goes out for lunch.” When we made love, the little one stood in her crib next to us and cried. Shani didn’t care. A few times I stopped but Shani drummed her fists on my back: “Go on, go on.”

Now it was less than forty miles to the border. "I love you so very much, you know," I said all of a sudden, as if I had completely lost control. "Not now," Shani said, and as I set out to apologize she repeated: "Not now!" Beyond Haifa the road shrank with the metered climb narrowing itself down to a garden hose, and I waited for trucks we would have to yield to, waited for fallen trees, road blocks, gates.

"Tsameret will forgive me," Shani said, "she is my mother." Shani spoke quietly, no trace of hesitation in her voice; there was no fear, only my feeling that Shani's optimism had slowed down the car, that we were gliding rather than driving, that the cypresses outside the window were themselves now moving and offering the old Honda a race. Something will catch up with us, I thought, a memory of the little one or Tsameret's end-all wrath. "She is my mother, damn it, she'll understand," said Shani, and when we finally got to Nahariya I asked her to stop the car, threw my door open, and hung my head beside the curb. I gagged a few times but nothing came up, just a little spit. I could feel Shani's hand on my back: "We have to get going, darling, we have to go." I pulled the door shut, reached down and adjusted my seat as far back as possible. When I closed my eyes, little stars flashed before a background of black. I turned my head to Shani and said: "No matter what happens." Although I hadn't finished the sentence she smiled and took a turn off the main road at the corner of Frishman. Here one house was cuddled up to the next, whitewashed two-story buildings; their front lawns reached all the way to the road and had enough space for children's bicycles and inflatable swimming pools. "I hate this neighborhood," Shani said, "and I hate all those damn bigots who live here."

When I spotted Tsameret, she was already walking in the middle of the road, her head closed in by thick angry curls. Her stocky upper body swayed the fast pace of her way-too-short legs. "Don't say a word," Shani pled, after she had stopped the car and opened her door. "Just stay in the car." She then took three steps toward Tsameret. The two women stood motionless just inches apart without greeting each other. That could be their ritual, I said to myself, the way they typically tackle a problem here in the north.

After a while I got out. I stood right next to the car and tried to catch Tsameret's eye. "Tell this man I don't want to see him," were the first words Tsameret spoke that morning, and Shani replied: "It's not David's fault." Although I could feel Tsameret's hatred, I just stood there, the soft wind cooling my sweat, the glare pinching my eyes closed. I can survive this, I thought, this unbearable heat, Tsameret, Tomer and his white Jeep, I can survive somewhere in the mountains that are fighting their way into the heights behind Frishman Street. "Where is the little one?" Tsameret asked. I got back into the car.

At four o'clock in the morning Shani had rung my bell. A short ring, I stumbled down the three flights of stairs, yanked the door open and asked into Shani's swollen eyes: "Are you really sure?" She nodded vigorously as if she had to persuade herself, took my hand, and pulled me towards the car. "Quick now!" she yelled as if Tomer had followed her, "Quick!" She drove out of the city through Abu Tor and Rehavya, always along the old city wall. "Tomer never takes this route, he is so afraid of everything." I wanted to put my hand on Shani's shoulder, touch her arm, and did none of it. Without talking we drove past Tel Aviv, Ben Gurion Airport flickering in the night looking like an impossibility, and when Shani finally stopped crying I asked again: "Are you sure?" We wanted to drive to Kiriath Schmona, right next to the border. "Tomer is afraid of the rockets, he won't show up here." And when I didn't answer: "The town is in a coma, David, do you understand?"

Now Shani and Tsameret stood right in front of each other and did not say a word while I sat in the open car and suddenly felt sure I wanted Shani whatever the consequences. Tomer would report Shani as missing, the police would look for her, we would not be able to cross a border, get on a plane. Always on the move within militarily-controlled borders, past passport control checkpoints, along fences ten meters high. Tsameret gave Shani two clear plastic bags with food for the road. From a distance I could make out two bananas, apples, a whole loaf of white bread, and several chocolate and cereal bars. "Does this man know what he does to our family?"

Still neither woman took that last step towards the other, although it was almost eleven. "Tell Tomer we weren't here, Mother," said Shani. "Just tell him I am sorry. Tell him something, tell him I will soon come to get the little one, tell him it will be all right, tell him not to lose his head." Tsameret's wet cheeks reflected the sunlight, she dried them with her right sleeve. "He'll know where you are," she said, sobbing, "because you left the little one behind. He'll know that you never would have taken her to Kiriat Schmona. Tomer's not stupid!" Shani nodded. "But he's a coward, Mother, he won't follow us there."

I had been introduced to Tomer ten days in. Shani had decided it was less dangerous if we met. We sat on the patio at Tomer's parents' place, talked about the Holy Sepulchre and about the fact that Tomer often got lost in the old town of Jerusalem because he seldom got close to the border of the Palestinian part in the east of the city. I pretended that there was nothing wrong. After three hours I stood up and hugged Tomer first, then Shani. Maybe Shani had lain her cheek too close to mine when we said goodbye.

Behind the two women a white Jeep turned into Frishman Street. I could see how Shani recoiled in shock and then stood up straight again. Then she said: "I was in the army as well, Mother, but I'm over it. The war has to end sometime, for Tomer as well." Tsameret shook her head and regarded the asphalt, her arms dangling at her sides like strange objects she no longer knew how to use. "You are going to Kiriat Schmona and you talk about the end of the war?" she said. "You should listen to yourself talk, child."

Shani's cell phone sitting on the driver's seat beeped, two short tones that made me feel more uneasy than the short commercial breaks for private air shelters shown before prime time. I wondered if Shani had heard the beeps, if she was about to turn around and come back to the car, but she remained standing on the road, which had started shimmering in the heat, looking at her mother. "David would not be the first person Tomer has killed. I can't let that happen."

The evening before our escape Shani had called me crying. "Tomer knows about us," she had said, and that he was not accountable for

his actions. I stood in the kitchen of my apartment and looked at the closet doors upon which the years had breathed a pale gray, then I stepped out on the little balcony that overlooked the soccer field. I counted sixteen kids playing between two metal handball goals when Shani said, "David?" and I replied, "I am still here, darling." At the Goethe Institute, they would start worrying the next day. I could let my family know. My mother had tried to hold me back even on the day of departure: "It's too dangerous for you down there." I had laughed at her.

The wind was getting stronger and ballooned Tsameret's white linen shirt. Shreds of paper and leaves were blown along the street past Shani's old Honda. I brought the seat upright and felt as if time had stopped, the houses of Nahariya deserted, as if someone had ordered the world to stop and I was the only person who could bring an end to it. But I didn't want to have to think of us as refugees, of Shani as a displaced person in her own country. I wanted to lie against Shani's warm back and hum the songs of my childhood into her ear, inspire her with the very way of life into which I wanted to abduct her, to Berlin if necessary. The sky showed its most peaceful blue, the sheep-like clouds above the mountains formed picture postcards, and Tsameret finally took that one necessary step toward Shani, took her in her arms, and sobbed: "Of all people a German, dear, why of all people a German?"

*Note: This translation of "Nahariya" appears thanks to an exchange with the German literary magazine Edit, whose issue 47 featured Eula Biss's essay "Time and Distance Overcome," originally published by us last spring.*