December 13, 1999

Tel Aviv at night is dark palm trees and a glow from the beaches, sidewalk graffiti invisible when it doesn't glitter. I leave the hospital at three in the morning and wait on the curb that was cobblestone until five years ago. Rafer, whose bus went out of service at two, drives me across town, towards Yaffa, the apartment Ephraim picked when we were younger, above the worst pizza parlor in the city. Again he wants to know why we are not having an affair.

"Why will you not let me kiss you, Leah?" he asks.

"Because I'm taken and because you're too old for me, that's why."

Rafer is not that much older than I am, fifty to my forty, but when I first met him I thought he was my father's age. He attributes this to long nights behind the wheel of a fig truck and an orange truck and a falafel cart and now this bus he heaves un-elegantly around street corners. He wears a yarmulke above his grey hair, he has a beard that bristles over the steering wheel.

"We could run away tonight, Leah," he says. "Or we could just get drunk."

"Rafer, just so you know where I'm coming from, tonight I sewed a woman's heart into her chest, so I'm a little tired, if you know what I mean." This isn't true. Once I was a medic but now I'm just a nurse. Tonight was bedpans and blood tests and a few minutes with Danya, but this ride is my half-hour weekly with a receptive audience and I'll damn anyone who doesn't let me take advantage.

"Next week," he says.

"Sure," I say, though next week the conversation will not change – I'll still sew hearts and he'll still want drinks - and I kiss near his cheek as he screeches in front of YItaliano's where Frederico, the owner's sixteen year old son, is already rolling out dough and poking his arm into the oven. I haven't spent enough time with Danya to need to talk to him tonight.

The steps up to the apartment are wood and beginning to rot, and they sag slightly, like Ephraim's muscles. In the ten years since he left active duty he seems to have deflated, resigned himself to a desk and several medals. Still, he's in better shape than the Asian kid in the postcards David sends me from Massachusetts, though it is not really nice to think like this: his adopted son. I keep the postcards in my locker at work, with the scrubs I change into in the morning and hairbrush I only occasionally remember to use. Ephraim likes to say the last time I wore lip gloss was 1985.

Ephraim. He sleeps in grey wife-beaters and boxers that are either backwards or inside out. He sleeps curled in an awkward ball, arm tossed over the left side of the mattress, always forgetting I prefer the right. If I get into bed now he'll roll over me, correct his mistake without opening his eyes. Instead I pull back the curtains, refurbished bed sheets Frederico's father Raphael was throwing in the trash. He doesn't understand why I'm allergic to throwing away perfectly good things. Ephraim doesn't either. I look out at the ocean, boats drifting across it, specks of light. The best view here. I'm not religious, not even close, so it's hard sometimes to get used to the notion that, anytime I want, I can walk to the Wailing Wall and pretend to speak to God.

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“Your mother called,” Ephraim says, and for a moment I think he said, your brother, but I know that isn’t right. His boxers are inside out this morning and I tug the threadbare tag as I pass him to make toast. He leans in as though to kiss me. I ignore it.

“We don’t have eggs,” I say, leaning into the fridge, which smells of moldy citrus and is oddly warm.

“No more meat,” Ephraim says, “I told you already, no?”

“Eggs aren’t meat,” I say, “I’ll go see if Frederico has anything other than dough. Or are you off cheese, too?”

“You don’t hear me,” Ephraim says. “Your mother called.”

“I heard you,” I say.

Ten years ago I would have cared but now I’m over it. Now I’ve learned to nod and agree, even if I don’t know what I’m agreeing to. My mother calls more and more now, she invents holiday dinners and birthday parties I’m sure are for two, and I always tell her *stop*. I’ve learned to forget things like the past, because what really matters is what’s in front of you, solid minutes rather than dissipating memories. I don’t take pictures or write journals, and I never have.

“I’ll call her,” I say, but I wait till later, when Ephraim has left and I’m alone in the loft-like space, gliding barefoot through the one large room that comprises our apartment. As if there are no walls, or secrets either. My mother lives in New York, seven hours ahead, and if I wait long enough she will be napping, or eating dinner, or out on a walk with the man who lives next door, who gives her roses every Sunday and bakes her cheesecake when she gets too thin.

I call at two. The phone rings four times, and I am more than happy to leave a message.

December 14, 1999

It is afternoon and I am crossing to the beach with Frederico, tearing at one of the breadsticks I've sworn off. This is the time of day when the teenagers take over the beach – volleyball nets strung up and girls with rolled-up skirts wading into water that has gotten too cold. The Mediterranean is black and my sneaker crushes an empty soda can.

"Don't you want to play?" I ask Frederico. "The geriatric ward is probably getting dull."

"What do you mean, geriatric?" Frederico asks, and I lean down to pick up the soda can. There must be recycling around here somewhere, but I always forget where it is. I can no longer squat easily and the backs of my legs ache.

"I mean," I say, staying low to the ground for a minute, "that I am old."

"My father is old," Frederico say, "you are not." I look up at him, squinting through the sun that, this time of year, doesn't keep me warm. He is a thin boy in a long black t-shirt that makes him look like empty space, perhaps his choice. He has a habit of chewing un-edible things like erasers and drinking straws. According to his father he gets top marks in school, but I've never seen him bring friends home.

"Don't you want to play volleyball? La exercise?"

"Esercizio," he corrects me. This is a joke between us – after twenty years in this country my Hebrew is poor and learning Italian isn't any easier.

“Esercizio, you know what I mean.”

“I’m not feeling like it,” Frederico says.

“That’s what you said yesterday.”

“I say it on Tuesday.”

“Mr. Contrarian. When will you feel like it? When I’m a hundred? It’s farther away than you think.”

Frederico shrugs, a quick gesture, almost a flutter. He has a scar that runs from his collarbone down to his hip, and since he was six he has refused to take off his shirt. He sits next to me on the sand, rubbing his grubby fingers through it.

“You can play with this on,” I say, taking the fabric of his t-shirt between my fingers and tugging at it. Frederico turns away from me and digs into the sand, pulling up a seashell, a wire that won’t come up from under the ground. Or maybe not a wire, it’s thicker than that, round little links, like the start of a chain-link fence.

“Where do you think this goes?” Frederico asks, and we spend the next hour digging down the beach, following the buried fence past teenagers attempting to hide a bong that puffs its maple-sweet scent unmistakably, past a boy leaning over a girl, sheltered by an umbrella, sleek lines of human beings that remind me of something but don’t quite seem real. The fence takes us to the cold edge of the water, and we wade in to our ankles.

“Where do you think it goes?” Frederico asks, his voice hushed and bright, like when he was a little boy. We take turns, the two of us: Egypt, Morocco, Hawaii. I have forgotten all about the soda can.

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In a year and six months Frederico will leave me. Not leave in the typical sense – I have Ephraim for that, if he ever gets the nerve – but I have an irrational fantasy of making Danya and Frederico fall in love with each other, when she is walking again and he has grown into some sort of confidence. So maybe the army will be good for that.

I am back at the hospital now, clocking into the florescent lights, steering from room to room, heavy doors and plastic curtains and faces I am always trying to forget. There are two types of patients, the ones who watch you draw their blood and the ones who look anywhere else: the ceiling, my neck, their other fist as they tense and let go. Tonight Patient #5 is a tourist who has fainted in the Arab quarter and her mother, who calls her Vivien, has grey hair that puffs around her head like feathers. She is tiny like my own mother and anxious even though her daughter doesn't seem interested in anything other than the TV she can't believe doesn't have MTV…and why isn't it on the ceiling, she asks.

"What is this, a prison?"

"A hospital," I tell her. She is the type that looks right at me as I stick the needle in, waiting for me to do something wrong. She gives a little yelp, catlike.

"A mental hospital?"

I don't answer the question. The room stinks of Vivien's perfume, overripe vanilla, which is probably what made her faint in the first place. The mother wants to know when they can leave, and I want to say, "soon."

Why can't more girls be like Danya?

Tonight Danya is sleeping curled on her side. She has pale, high cheekbones like a heroine who never makes it to the end of a movie. Her hair is horribly tangled and I brush it without waking her up, something I have gotten very good at. I braid it and kiss her on the forehead and as I am leaving she reaches her hand out to me.

"So today," I whisper, "Frederico and I found a chain link fence in the sand. It was buried like that, under the sand. Where do you think it leads?"

"Home," she says, but I can tell she isn't listening. I hope she is dreaming. Last year, when she was caught on the edge of a blast that killed twelve and injured twenty, she was only eighteen, the age I was when I came here and thought for the first time I might stay.

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Ephraim is on his last set of push-ups when I get home. I kiss him and try to like it but his sweat slides onto my forehead and he tastes like too much fruit. I throw him a towel which he holds, confused, like he's forgotten that he has to take a shower.

"Your mother called again," he says. He's glaring now, eyes hard and black, and I can't help but feel that he is blaming me for the things that haven't gone wrong in my life.

"Oh yeah?" I get into bed without taking off my clothes. He doesn't notice. "Did she tell you about Arthur and his never ending cheesecakes?"

"Why won't you call her, Leah?" Ephraim has finally realized he is sweating and wipes her forehead, his shoulders, then sits on the edge of the bed so I can wipe his back.

"I did call her." It's nice, for once, not to lie. "I called her this morning. I left a message on the machine."

“Why not call her now?”

“Why don’t you take a shower?”

Ephraim is already up, and turning on the water. His boxers are crumpled on the floor next to the door of the bathroom, and I get up to gather them and hang the towel in the bathroom. The water is cold but Ephraim is under it anyway. He says,

“She promises not to talk too long if you call her back.”

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When I think about seeing my brother I think of cars. Cars and houses. I don’t know why this is. I have a memory, or maybe a dream, of moving too quickly and wanting to stop, of a highway disappearing into a black blur and the back of my brother’s head motionless. He couldn’t be bothered to care. I have an image of houses and cars underneath us – are we in a tree? Are we in an airplane? –And they seem to be shrinking, dollhouse size, then Lego size. I think of the gift our father gave my brother when we first moved to New Jersey, a construction set, shiny red plastic and manufactured metal screws. Too young for him, all wrong. Cole was eight and I was four. We sat down for dinner and our father was late and when he finally came in, coat wet from the fog, buttons uneven, my brother took the gift from its unwrapped box and stomped it, crushed it, jumped on it. This is the first memory I have of him.

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“I would never leave you,” Ephraim says now. Or maybe he doesn’t say it. The one hour our sleeping schedules overlap it’s hard to identify what’s real and what’s the fringe of a dream. At first I was able to make the distinction based on whether or not I smelled bread (Frederico,

downstairs) but now I see rolls and pie crust in my sleep, so that's gone too. Ephraim pulls me closer, his arm still damp from the shower, the strong smell of aftershave, almost too clean.

He is happy with me tonight. Happy because I have called my mother, happy because my mother and I have had a conversation, a real one – not just happy birthday thank you bye – he is happy because he is oblivious to the tone of my mother's voice, which is too cheerful to mean anything good. She has asked, she has insisted, a ticket has already been bought and a room has been rented at a motel in Massachusetts. An art show of some kind. My brother's.

"What kind of opening?"

There isn't an answer to that either. The art show is in three days and should have been planned for months, at least. There isn't a reason for late notice, no explanation, but in any case my ticket has been bought, and I have many reasons not to trust this. For one, my brother has never invited me to an opening before, though my mother has tried a number of things: anniversaries, Thanksgiving dinners, birthday parties, a Passover Seder.

"I'm forty years old," I'd said, hanging up. "Can't I say no?"

Forty years is four hundred eighty months, but how many days? When my father left home for the first time I was nine and I counted and a week felt endless. Now I can blink away entire decades.

"You cannot say no," Ephraim said. He thought this was a joke. "When your family calls it is your duty to answer."

"We're not in the army anymore."

"I am still, Leah."

“We’re not in the army anymore, and your work is clerical and we live over a pizza place because that’s all we can afford. Lineage isn’t everything.”

“What do you mean, Leah?”

“Don’t be a moron!” And this begins an hour of screaming, and usually our fights are like blank walls: I yell, he eventually agrees. Not this time. This time Ephraim tells me I am being a bitch; he uses this word, spits it. He looks like he is going to cry. He pulls an unwashed sweatshirt over his head and marches, literally marches, out of the apartment, stomping loudly, and I call out: “You know those steps aren’t very secure!”

I feel bad about this, I do. When I left America my brother was married to one woman, now, supposedly, he is married to someone else. Once I was waiting in a dentist’s office and there was a reproduction of one of his paintings, which looked to me like random splattering, the type of thing my mother used to make him paint over on the basement walls. I tried to help him hide it from her.

Before I know it I am packing a suitcase. Ephraim is back.

“You are nicer than you pretend to be,” Ephraim says. He opens the closet, holds out another dress, red and cheerful, and I shake my head.

“I’m not nice. I’m not nice to you.”

“You are nice to all your patients and they love you.” I want to tell him that it’s easy to be nice to people you know you’ll never see again. My brother was always nice to strangers, even when he was in art school and broke he couldn’t pass a homeless man without giving him a five dollar bill. Ephraim puts his hand on my stomach and his skin is cold.

“I can come with you,” he says. “We can afford it.”

“No we can’t,” I say, but I really mean, *please don’t.*

December 15, 1999

I go to work first. Clean out my locker, disinfect it. I can’t leave things in such a mess. I’ve packed a small suitcase and folded three outfits as neatly as possible to prevent wrinkling, one of the few good habits I picked up from my mother.

During the day the hospital looks too bright. I miss yellow fluorescents, the loud hum of the refrigerators, doctors whispering loudly, importantly, the purpose in their walk.

“You are glad to get away from me?” Ephraim asks, half joking, and I give my locker one final spray, one final sweep, click it closed. I’m embarrassed for him to see how messy I am. He wears a leather coat that always comes out on days he feels unsure of himself. He means for it to make him look tough but the shoulders are stiff and the leather seems fake.

“You have a reason to be glad. You get the apartment to yourself for a week and I get to freeze to death.”

“If you let me come with you, you wouldn’t freeze.”

He puts his arm around my waist and I squeeze his wrist, because I feel bad and because of the leather jacket. He still smells like oranges and his stubble pricks my cheek even though he is inches away. A nurse comes in and leaves just as quickly when she sees us, as though

stumbling on something private. I call for her to come back but Ephraim puts his palm over my mouth and whispers in my ear, “I wish you would let me come.”

I squeeze away from him. Sometimes it feels like he is pushing me into corners. He is handsome and I know it but this is a fact that feels irrelevant.

“It just feels more comfortable this way,” I say. “They’d bore you, anyway.” Ephraim pulls the jacket tighter around him.

“Do you want me to wait in the car?”

It turns out there is not much to do because Danya is sleeping and someone else has brushed her hair and braided it and she is breathing evenly. The air smells off, like powder trying to mask sickness. I sit on the side of the bed and scribble a card – *I know you will be well* – and for the first time I believe it. It is the middle of the day and light is stronger than the curtains, and I can see a stronger version of her walking on the beaching, having a life I am not a part of. I know I should be happy. I kiss her on the cheek. Her scabs have started to fall away.

I drive. At stoplights I hold Ephraim’s hand. I want to. I am surprised all over again by the size of Ben Gurian Airport, the high glass ceilings and the palm trees. Tour buses like the one I first came on are in the back lot, the ugly lot, so visitors will be temporarily disgusted then overwhelmed by the beauty of the city. That’s what happened to me.

“I’ll park and meet you in customs,” Ephraim says.

“Not necessary,” I say. “I have a book,” and I do, one David gave me the last time I saw him. It is called *Company Five* and it is about a soldier who returned to America after the Yom Kippur War. David gave it to me ten years ago, his last visit, in a café in Tel Aviv that I pass on

the ride back from work. I've read the jacket cover, the copyright, the author's thanks, but I've never gotten past the first sentence of Chapter One.

"Philip Roth," I say, putting my hand on Ephraim's cheek and leaning in to kiss him.

"Who?"

"You know who Philip Roth is,"

"Yes," Ephraim says, "But I can't think about that now." Ephraim's lips are dry and he presses too hard against me, like he's begging for something.

"American Pastoral," I say, getting out of the car.

"A good book for going to America."

"I can take my bags myself."

He lets me. The lines are long today, and the attendant seems grateful for my small suitcase, my lack of electronics. Then there are the kids with eight types of devices, ear plugs hanging out of their ears and rings hiding the skin on their fingers. Blue hair, a statement of something. There's a small girl in front of me, maybe five or six, spinning around in circles with her arms wrapped tightly around her chest. When she topples over, a blur of pink sweater and brown hair, she blinks upward, bewildered, then smiles, as though she's been willing the fall to happen all along.

Jenny Halper's fiction has appeared in journals including Wigleaf Top 50 Very Short Stories 2009, Smokelong Quarterly, Frigg, and New England Fiction Meetinghouse, and is forthcoming in an anthology from Persea Books. She is a 2009 Graduate of Emerson's MFA Program and is the Junior Development Executive at Mandalay Vision where she worked on films including this year's *The Kids Are All Right*.