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Message In A Bottle

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Extract

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It's a time of darkness, sadness and horror. The fear's back again.

Mum had just told me to go to bed for the third time (because I have to get up early in the mornings) when the windows started rattling. My heart gave a great thump inside my chest, I thought it had come halfway up my throat. A second later I realised there had been an explosion really close to our house.

An explosion must mean a bomb.

My older brother Eytan, who's a military nurse, ran straight out with his first aid kit. Dad hesitated for a moment, then followed him. Mum held me in her arms and cried; then, as usual, she did four things at once: she turned on the TV and the radio, connected to the internet and grabbed her mobile. That's what I call a highly technological response.

I ran to my bedroom, confident that no one would nag me to switch my light off and that the next day I could even get to school late, or not go at all, nobody would ask for an explanation. I would just have to say the bomb was in my neighbourhood, in my street, I had nightmares all night, my blood pressure plummeted, I couldn't walk, I was too frightened to leave the house. And Mrs Barzilaï would believe me, even if we had a maths test.

A few minutes after the explosion we heard the ambulance sirens – such a horrible noise, ripping through the air and your eardrums. A terrible mewling like a cat with its tail caught in a door, amplified by a sound system worthy of a hard rock concert. Five, six, seven ambulances, but I didn't count them all.

I can hear Mum still on the phone, and the clear staccato voice of some woman correspondent on the radio or the TV. There will have been some deaths. There are almost always deaths. But I don't want to know how many, or who. Not today. Precisely because it happened so close to home.

I'd like to turn the silence right up, but how do you do that?

I went into the kitchen to drink a bit of vodka and lemon. Mum didn't see me. On my way I picked up the earplugs Dad uses when he goes swimming. With those plus my big pillow over my head I might have some hope of sleeping, even if I know that when I wake up tomorrow no one will tell me that everything's fine and it's all been a bad dream.

The vodka didn't go down very well. Half a glass is obviously too much for me. This morning I had a headache and my face was all swollen. 'You look like Bugs Bunny,' Eytan told me, ruffling my hair. My brother's the only person in the world who can mess up my hair without being walloped within a second. He knows that and makes the most of it.

He smiled at me. He didn't look like someone who'd spent the night witnessing horror, but then what do you look like when you've witnessed horror? He's twenty years old and doing military service in Gaza: I'm sure he sees terrible things every day . . . or every other day, when it's quiet. I expect he's learned not to see, or to forget, if he wants to avoid looking old before his time.

It's strange, I don't think I've ever written as much as I have between yesterday and today. There are some girls in my class who keep diaries and write down what happens to them every day. I've never done that, dissected my love life, or said how old and useless my parents are, or divulged my dreams. Well, I imagine that's what you put in a diary.

On my thirteenth birthday my grandmother gave me *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the story of the young Jewish girl in the Netherlands who spent two years of her life hiding with her family during the Second World War, before being deported. She dreamed of being a writer but, more importantly, to live freely, to be able to go to the cinema, to walk in a garden, look at the trees and listen to the birds without fear of being caught and killed by the Nazis. There was

another family in the hiding place with a son called Peter, and she fell in love with him. I've often wondered whether she really loved him or whether she didn't have any choice because he was the only boy there.

What upset me most was the end of the book where it said: Anne Frank died two months before the camp at Bergen-Belsen was liberated.

Just two months . . . I read that sentence again and again, and for a long time I wished I could reach out, take Anne Frank's hand and say, 'Hang on, this hell is nearly over, it won't go on for ever. Just eight little weeks, hang on and you'll be free, you'll be able to go to the cinema, to look at the trees and listen to the birds, you could even be a writer. Please, live!'

But I don't have superpowers or a time machine, and that's what's so heartbreaking when you think about it.

I still don't know why I'm writing all this. I get average marks for literature, nothing more, and I have no dreams of being a writer. What I really want is to make films, to be a director. Or perhaps a paediatrician, I haven't really chosen yet. But, since yesterday evening, I've got this incredible urge to write, it's all I can think about. As if there's a river of words bursting to come out of me to keep me alive. I feel as if I'll never be able to stop.

I haven't managed to avoid the news. My eyes see, my ears hear, there are newspapers and radios everywhere, and they keep talking about the bomb attack.

The terrorist blew himself up inside the Hillel café. They

found six bodies. It's what they call an average attack, which means it will be talked about for a couple of days and then there will be a bit more in the Sunday supplements. There was a tragedy, a tragedy within the tragedy: a young woman was killed with her father. She was due to be married today. She was killed a few hours before putting on her beautiful white dress, a few hours before the photographer took the young couple to the loveliest places in Jerusalem to take pictures of the prince and princess who would have lots of children. The groom-who-never-got-married was devastated by the sight of her coffin. He wanted to put the wedding ring on his fiancée's finger but the rabbi refused, saying religious law forbade celebrating a union with a dead person.

I wonder whether religious law devotes a chapter to how to behave when you're in despair.

I close my eyes to forget the face of that girl who'll never be married. She was just twenty, barely three years older than me. What would my life be like if I knew I only had three years left? I have no idea – it's a stupid, pointless question but I still can't stop thinking about it.

When the fear comes back, like now, we all seem to forget who we are. We all become potential victims, bodies that could end up lifeless and covered in blood just because someone chose to blow themselves up right next to us. I want to know who I am, what I'm made of. What would make my death any different from any other? If I said that to my parents or friends, they'd be really shocked and would

tell me gently I needed to rest. That must be why I've decided to write: so I don't frighten the others with what's going on inside my head . . . and don't let them pronounce me raving mad.

Seeing doves fly

My name is Tal Levine. I was born in Tel Aviv on the 1st of July 1986, but I live here in Jerusalem. I know that everyone on the planet knows the name Jerusalem and if there are extraterrestrials they've probably heard about it too, it's a city that creates quite a stir. But no one knows it like my father and me. My father is passionate about history and archaeology, he's one of Israel's greatest tour guides. When a head of state visits, he's the one they call on because he brings the stones to life with his stories. He's a magician: he has limpid green eyes and this strange gleam comes into them when he starts talking about how King David chose to put the capital of his kingdom on this rocky mountain such a long way from the sea or a river, how his son Solomon built a Temple and palaces, how Nebuchadnezzar, then the Romans, destroyed the Temple. He can talk for hours about Jesus, who looked over Jerusalem from the cross.

'Do you realise, Tal,' he often says, 'this is where all that happened and this is where everything still will happen.' He explains how, much later, European crusaders fought the Muslims to reclaim Jesus's tomb. And then there were the long centuries when this Holy City fell from splendour. The Old Town, a tiny place stifled by its city walls, was all there was until a hundred years ago. 'Dark little streets,' my father says, 'streets where a donkey could bump into a man without wondering whether he was a Jew, a Christian or a Muslim. Several thousand good, pious people watched over the sacred sites of the three religions, thinking they were the last to remember them and that, as the world moved into a modern era, people would forget that Jerusalem is the centre of the universe. They were wrong. When the Jews chose to come back to the land of their ancestors to be a free people, rivalries over the city began to simmer. The Jews said they'd been here first, three thousand years earlier, that it was written in the Bible and that, in the two thousand years when they had had no country, all their prayers had been turned towards Jerusalem. The Muslims replied that they had been there for thirteen centuries, which is not really to be sniffed at, and that their prophet Mohammed had flown to the skies from here. The Christians tried to get their word in, reminding the others that Jesus died here and, should he ever come back to life, there was a strong chance it would be in the same place so it would be a good idea to have a few of them on the spot to welcome him. But you see, Tal, instead of loving this city in the way it deserves, instead of getting on, they've fought over her for more than

fifty years, the way men might once have fought for a woman, with passion, with a little more hate for their rivals every day. They don't even realise their wars are now damaging the thing they claim to love, damaging it more and more violently in one way or another.'

That's how my father talks. That's what makes him a wonderful poet, a storyteller. I could walk with him for hours, travelling through time, looking at my city through different eyes from most people's. I know there are amazing cities in the world, I would love to see Paris, Venice, Beijing and New York, but I already know that this is where I want to live.

To live, and not to die.

I'm back on the subject now. I can't think about anything else at the moment, I can't forget the fact that the bomb was so close to home.

A few years ago I went walking by the Dead Sea with my father and Eytan. I fell and cut myself very badly. It was a really frightening, ugly wound, but I couldn't take my eyes off the blood, off that long opening from my knee to my ankle which made me feel as if my leg was no longer my leg.

I've got exactly the same feeling now, except that I'm all in one piece. But inside my head, I'm in bits. I keep thinking how often I go to the Hillel café, with Eytan when he's on leave, or with my friends. I keep thinking we could have been there. I don't understand how life can hang on so little: whether or not you feel like going to the café along the street.

There has been an incalculable number of bomb attacks in Jerusalem in the last three years. Sometimes it's every day, or even twice a day. You can't keep up with the funerals on TV or crying for the families, there are too many of them.

People say they get used to it. Not me.

I grew up with the idea that there could be something other than blood, hate and mutilated bodies between us and the Palestinians.

I was seven years old in 1993, but I remember the 13th of September really clearly. Mum and Dad didn't go to work, they bought tons of crisps, little sausages, pistachio nuts, and champagne too. Their eyes sparkled and they kept the TV on the whole time but couldn't sit still in front of it.

It's very rare for the TV to be on in the daytime.

It's even rarer for my parents to buy crap to eat.

It's incredibly rare for them to let us, Eytan and me, stuff our faces and not say anything.

And it's seriously unbelievable that they gave me, aged seven, champagne to drink.

It's probably because of all that that I remember the 13th of September 1993 so well. On the screen, standing in front of a palace made of icing sugar, was our Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin. Next to him was some bloke who looked like an actor from an American soap. In fact it was the President of the United States, Bill Clinton. He took Yitzhak Rabin by the shoulder and led him to a weird man with a black and white chequered scarf over his head. I gathered

from what the commentator was saying that this was Yasser Arafat, representing the Palestinians. The two men shook hands and all those thousands of people in their best clothes standing on the White House lawn (it said on the screen: 'Live from the White House') clapped as if this was some fantastical achievement.

That was when I saw my parents cry for the first time. I was very embarrassed, and I think I was annoyed with them. There they were with these incomprehensible tears in their eyes, looking like little children, and I felt like saying, 'You'd better get back to being you quickly – I don't mind if you're serious, strict or gentle but just get back to being my parents, and parents don't cry, as far as I know. They know everything, they're very dependable and very strong, they don't just start crying ridiculously because they see two men shaking hands.'

I also remember being very frightened because, if my parents were crying, that meant something awful had happened and our life was going to change. The champagne, the crisps, the little sausages and the pistachio nuts must have been there to celebrate our last moments together, or some other dramatic, irreversible event.

Dad looked at me.

'Come over here, Tal.'

He sat me on his knee, stroked my face and said, 'People sometimes cry with happiness, sweetheart. And we're very, very happy today. What you've just seen is very important: the Palestinians and us, the Israelis, are finally going to agree about how to live in peace. There

won't be any more war, ever. Maybe you and Eytan won't even have to do national service. This is the most overwhelming piece of news because we've dreamed of it for so long.'

He believed in it, my father did. And, as I believe everything he tells me, at least that made two of us who saw white doves flying through the skies above Jerusalem that day.

A letter, a bottle, some hope

It happened this morning, during Mrs Feldman's biology lesson. How do ideas happen? In cartoons a bulb lights up. Bling! The hero smiles, he's pleased, like God in the Bible on the first day of the Creation, he wanted there to be light and there was light. But I wasn't hoping for anything, I didn't feel particularly in the dark. I was listening attentively to Mrs Feldman explaining genetics, taking peas as her example. I thought it was funny, picturing a Mr Pea and a Mrs Pea who decide to have children and worry whether they'll be small and smooth or fat and wrinkled, and most importantly whether they will taste of anything. Then all of a sudden I heard inside my head: *I've got to send what I've written to someone.* It was my silent voice, the one we all have, the voice inside our heads when we're thinking. Maybe what Mrs Feldman was saying woke it up, something like 'genetics allows for detailed studies of similarities

and differences in individuals of the same species, and for comparisons of different species'. Then there was quite a hubbub because Dov, the class joker, put up his hand to ask a question. Mrs Feldman was delighted to see him joining in the lesson for once and she turned towards him, tilting her chin and smiling encouragingly.

'Yes, Dov?'

'While we're on the subject, miss, do you know what's small, round and goes up and down in a lift?'

The whole class burst out laughing and Mrs Feldman, who didn't seem to know the joke or had forgotten it thirty years ago, got angry.

I heard the voice again: *Yes, that's it, someone's got to read it, on the other side.*

In the next lesson, which was history, I didn't listen to anything because I was so excited. I was writing but not taking notes. Efrat, my best-friend-who-always-sits-next-to-me, whispered, 'What are you doing?'

'I'm writing a letter,' I replied, putting one hand over the piece of paper.

'Who to?'

'To . . . to Uri,' I stammered.

'Uri?' she said, raising one incredulous eyebrow. 'But you saw him yesterday and you'll see him later in break! Anyway, you never write to each other.'

That's the problem with best friends: you tell them everything and share everything with them, and in the end you can't have a square inch of secret garden without them turning into super-spies from the FBI, digging over the soil until

they find a bone.

'Well, you see, I realised there was stuff we couldn't say to each other and it would be easier to write,' I replied, more confidently this time.

Her face lit up.

'Is it a break-up letter?'

I shot her a nasty look and told her that if I were writing a break-up letter to Uri I would be sobbing, and that I couldn't think why this assumption made her so happy. She shrugged her shoulders, slightly annoyed, just as the history teacher (who always thinks he's so spiritual) snapped at us, 'Hey, you two gossips, this isn't the market, is it? You can sharpen your forked tongues after my lesson, please.'

I hate teachers who think that chatty girls are gossips and chatty boys just need to let off a bit of steam. Rosebush is one of them. (Obviously, our history teacher isn't called Rosebush, but Rosenbaum. Mum told me it meant Rosebush in German. Efrat and I laughed about it for two whole days and it's been his official nickname at school ever since.)

The whole class sniggered. I hated them for it. Specially the girls. But it just shows that female solidarity doesn't stand up to a misogynist teacher's bad jokes.

Efrat turned towards the blackboard, looking as if she were concentrating, and I was finally free to start my letter, which I've pasted in here.

Dear you,

If you ever read this letter you'll already know a few

things about me: my name, how old I am, my father's job, my best friend's name and even my history teacher's nickname.

But I don't know anything about you.

I imagine you with long dark hair, hazel eyes and – I'm not sure why – a dreamy expression.

I imagine you're often sad.

I imagine you're the same age as me, but I don't know whether, at seventeen, you feel very old or very young.

I imagine your heart beating faster sometimes, but when and for who?

I imagine that, like me, you wonder who you will be in ten years' time and that you can't see anything specific.

I imagine you have younger brothers who annoy you, but that you love them all the same.

And maybe you have an older brother you adore, like me.

You see, I started writing these pages just after the bomb went off near my house. I can still hear that terrible 'boom', and not an hour goes by when I don't see the smiling face and smooth hair of the girl who was supposed to get married.

You must know that every time there's a bomb everyone wonders how the Palestinians can do it, killing innocent people. I've often wondered myself.

And then I thought that it was meaningless saying 'the Palestinians'. That it must be the same with you as it is with us, there must be fat people and thin people, rich and poor, good people and bastards.

I'm full of fear and full of hope writing to you like this. I've never written to someone I didn't know. It feels strange. I'm not sure I'll manage to say what I want to say.

Maybe you'll tear up this letter and the pages with it. Maybe you feel nothing but hate when you hear the word Israel. Maybe you'll laugh at me. Or maybe you just don't exist.

But if this letter is lucky enough to reach you, if you're patient enough to read it to the end, if – like me – you think we should learn to know each other, for all sorts of reasons but mainly because we want to get on with living our lives in peace because we're young . . . then send me a reply.

I can't seem to say any more. I don't know if what I'm doing is good or bad, mad or just eccentric, useful or pointless.

I'm going to put all this in a bottle, the one we drank on the 13th of September 1993. Mum and Dad were keeping it as a souvenir of that great event, but never mind, I'll tell them I broke it.

I'll give the bottle to Eytan. I trust him: he won't tell anyone. And he'll do what I ask: he'll throw the bottle into the sea, in your country, in Gaza.

Of course if Efrat knew all this she'd say that a message in a bottle isn't much of a means of communication in a modern world, that I'm behaving like a character in a film. And I'd say that's exactly what I want to do, make films. But I've got this idea that, to make films, you have to have a good grasp of reality first.

I don't know whether the post works well between us

and the Palestinian territories, whether there's any censorship. So I'll give you an email address I've set up just for you to write to. It's bakbouk@hotmail.com*

There, I hope you'll reply. It's a bit bland to say it, but it's the truth: I really hope you will.

Yours,

Tal

Yesterday evening I went into Eytan's bedroom just before he went back to his base. There was an impressive collection of stuff on his bed: socks, T-shirts, packets of cigarettes, CDs and his CD player. And his gun too, of course, which I avoided looking at.

Just like every time he leaves, I could only think of the dangers he was facing: not a month goes by without some of our soldiers dying in Gaza. Mum always has trouble holding back her tears and he has trouble holding back his irritation.

'Come on, I *have* grown a bit since nursery, you know, Mum. I'm not a complete baby any more,' he tells her, staring down from all of his six feet.

'I know, but I don't like you being over there.'

'Well, you should have engineered a different future for us.'

Mum hates it when he says that. She doesn't like being held directly responsible for the Middle East situation. But, as she doesn't want to argue with her big boy of twenty just

*'Bakbouk' means 'bottle' in modern Hebrew.

before he goes away (and what if he never came back?), she doesn't say anything, kisses him, gives him money and asks whether he's remembered his mobile phone charger.

My big brother smiled at me. 'Have you come to give me last-minute advice too?'

'Eytan, there's something I want to ask you,' I said, holding the wrapped bottle in my arms.

'Bless, are you playing dolls again?' he said with a mocking grin.

'I'd like to remind you that I've NEVER played dolls because you told me dolls woke up in the night and bit people's toes and turned their bedrooms upside down.'

'And you believed me?' he asked, amazed.

'Obviously! But listen, this is really serious,' I went on. 'In this parcel there's a bottle. I want you to throw it into the sea, in Gaza.'

That wiped the smile off his face.

'Are you mad, Tal? I'm not allowed to throw anything anywhere, especially over there! If someone sees me, there could be an inquiry, I might be arrested. You don't seem to realise: Gaza's like a powder keg. Strike a match and the whole place goes up. You'll have to tell me what's in this bottle, at least, and why you want me to throw it in the sea.'

'No, I can't tell you. Well, I don't want to tell you. But I promise you it isn't drugs or weapons or any kind of contraband.'

He thought for a moment, frowning.

'You're sure this isn't a bloody stupid mistake?' he asked.

'Positive. Please do it. You're the only person I can ask.'

He took the parcel and stuffed it in the middle of the pile of T-shirts.

'OK,' he said with a sigh, 'but you are weird . . .'

I kissed him on both cheeks. Very hard.

Now all I can do is wait. And hope Eytan doesn't get into trouble because of me.

And keep my fingers crossed for something to happen, of course.

Something wonderful.