

There were two paths on the hill.  
One went up, and the other went down.  
We children from the youth village had  
created these paths with our feet. As time  
went on, there was an unspoken rule:  
You go up the hill on the path that leads  
from the road, and you go down on the  
other side. As you start going down,  
whoever is next in line starts going up  
toward the domim tree.  
But Yurek and I broke the rule.

—from *Under the Domim Tree*

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# CHAPTER 1

It all began one winter's day in the middle of the afternoon when Ariel, our counselor, decided to raise the issue of the German reparations. "Should the Israeli government accept or reject reparations from the German government for the Nazi crimes?" That's how he began. It was the first time that the subject of the Holocaust had been raised for discussion in our group. Until that day we hadn't spoken *here* about what had happened *there*—as if the past had been erased, as if everything began here, in Israel. Initially the discussion was very straightforward. The majority felt that there could be no reparations for genocide, for the murder of people, that money couldn't compensate for blood. I said, "Since I was born here, in Israel, I feel that I have no right to express an opinion about what happened there."

At first it was hard to recognize the storm that was brewing in the hearts of the kids. But later, in the dining room, Sarah B. said, "I don't believe the stupidity that I heard this afternoon. You're all thinking like little

children. After all, we're immigrants; we don't have parents who will look after us and do our thinking for us. We're talking about money. About the future. About our future. My future. I know that I deserve compensation. I know that they won't return my parents to me, or my family, or the childhood that they stole from me. But finally, I will have something that is mine."

Daniel shouted at her, "What kind of person are you? We're talking about our people, about the government of Israel, and you are trying to turn it into a personal discussion!"

"Is that anything new?" Zevick said. "Sarah was always different, an individualist. Why are you surprised? Don't waste your words or your nerves, Daniel. Just listen to how she talks: 'My future. My family.' As if we all didn't come from the same place!"

Zevick kept rubbing it in. "Just look at her, Daniel. Look at what she's eating. Gang," he continued, encouraged by the silence that had spread across the dining room. "Look at her." And everyone looked and laughed, releasing the tension that had been accumulating since the discussion on the reparations had begun. Zevick wouldn't stop: "Look, look at what she's eating. She's eating matzoh in the middle of the year. She's been saving it ever since Passover, because she's on a diet, and God forbid that she should run out of matzoh. She's not like all the other fat and simple girls in our group."

When he said the words "fat and simple," voices attacked him from all sides. "Come on, Zevick, stop

insulting us. There are some really beautiful girls in our group.”

Others cried out, “More! More!”

Zevick just continued his lecture. “Where was I? Oh yes, Sarah B. She’s different. She’s *special*.” And he cut up the word “special” into three syllables, emphasizing every sound—*spe-ci-al*.

Once again all eyes turned toward Sarah B. Everyone was waiting to see how she would react. And then we saw her chewing away at her matzoh, which was practically stuck in her throat.

She began to cough, and pieces of matzoh flew out of her mouth and scattered around the table. She no longer looked like a lady. Sarah B. tried to say something, but her voice was gone; her face was turning red, she began waving her hands, and she looked like someone who was drowning in the sea, struggling against the waves. Naomi, her good friend who was sitting next to her, hit her back and gave her a glass of water. Only then did the coughing stop. “Zevick, take a look at yourself,” Sarah said in a hoarse voice. “You’re so filled with envy. You’d just love to look a little different. You’re so unkempt. So unfortunate. So from *there*! So like you just got off the boat. Do I look like I just got off the boat? Everyone thinks I was born here, in Israel. If you were a human being, maybe I’d offer you my matzoh, but you’re nothing, Zevick, just Yurek’s little servant. That’s all you’ve ever been.”

That was a real deathblow. Sarah’s last words really

took Zevick by surprise. He looked over at Yurek, who was sitting there quietly.

“Did you hear what she said, Yurek?” he asked. “I’m nothing? I’m from *there*?” He waited to see what Yurek would do, and then he sat down mumbling, “There’s no one to talk to, no one.”

And then Yurek got up. “Leave Zevick alone, okay?” There was silence, nobody spoke, and then a minute later Yurek continued, “Sarah, I want to understand something. What do you mean by ‘My money. My future’? Your future is the same as ours—the group, the training farm, and the kibbutz that we’ll begin. Don’t you think that’s a good enough future?”

Sarah B. looked at him and responded in a confident voice, “Yurek, you make me laugh. Do you really think that I’m planning my future with all of you? With this group? We’ve been together for seven years, ever since the war. That’s plenty of time. Enough. I want to be able to get up in the morning alone and to go to sleep alone, in my own room and not together with four other girls. I don’t want a group; I don’t want to live with all of you for the rest of my life. Do you understand me, Yurek?” All of us were tense, waiting to see how he would react.

This time, Yurek, who always had a quick response to everything, was silent. He just stared at Sarah B. with a penetrating gaze. His narrowed eyes looked even narrower; his Adam’s apple stood out even more than usual, and it moved as if he were talking. But he didn’t say a word.



Sarah B. knew exactly what to do with that moment. She had an audience, and the stage was all hers. “So you’re silent, Yurek? Have nothing to say? You’re just not used to someone thinking differently, and saying it to your face—particularly me, huh?”

The eerie silence that spread over the dining room was broken by Ariel. “Gang,” he said, “I understand all the excitement. It was to be expected that different opinions would be heard. The whole country has been in turmoil for months over the question of the German reparations, and we’ll be returning to the subject again and again. But as for this, I must say that I admire Sarah’s honesty and courage.” He didn’t call her Sarah B. We called her that, so as not to confuse her with Sarah Altman, whom we called Sarah A. “I hope,” he continued, “that you’ll learn how to listen to an individual opinion and how to respect it.” We didn’t like the sympathetic tone in his voice when he spoke about Sarah B. Yurek was the unofficial leader of our group. And he had been defeated by Sarah B., his girlfriend, and Ariel even expressed an understanding for her.

Before Ariel had finished speaking, Yurek had gotten up and left the dining room. At first we thought it was just for a moment, that he would be right back. But when he didn’t return, Zevick said, “The monster ruined his appetite.”

During the meal I prepared sandwiches of white cheese, olives, tomato, and lettuce for Yurek, and I wrapped them up in a napkin. Before we left, I gave the

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sandwiches to Zevick. "They're for Yurek," I said.

"When are you going to stop worrying about the whole world?" my best friend, Ayala, asked me. "Let his girlfriend make food for him."

On the following day we continued arguing until evening, and the storm still hadn't subsided. At the entrance to the dining room, I was just washing my hands in the sink when I bumped into Yurek. He was standing right next to me. "Clean hands? Let's see," he said. I obediently stretched out my hands and almost touched him. He tossed a ball of paper into my outstretched palms and said, "It's for you, Aviya."

"Thanks," I said, and turned toward my table. I thought, *This Yurek, he doesn't thank me for yesterday's sandwiches, but he gives me a ball of paper.* So why did I blush when he stood so close to me? I hoped that he hadn't noticed how excited I was. When he spoke to me, I felt his words blowing in my face. He had never stood so close to me before.

And then, at that exact moment, Sarah B. came in and sat down at her regular place at Yurek's table. They always sat together. They were going together. A couple. The oldest and most stable couple in our group. Two that were one. Even when they had arrived at the youth village, directly from Poland, from *there*, they were already a couple.

I came to the village after they did, and they were introduced to me as Sarah B., who's going with Yurek,