

Ofir Touche Gafla**Extracts from the novel END'S WORLD****1. The End**

Some fifteen months after Marianne lost her life under bizarre aeronautical circumstances, her husband decided to celebrate her fortieth birthday. Their old friends, well aware of the couple's love for one another, were not surprised to find, amid the daily monotony of their mail, an invitation to the home of the live husband and the late wife. They also knew that he had yet to have his final word on the matter, and that, beneath the emotional prattle and the love-soaked murmurs, Ben Mendelssohn was a man of action. His friends, put at ease by the invitation, saw the party as classic Mendelssohn, which is to say a come-as-you-are, be-ready-for-anything affair. After all, Ben paid the bills with his imagination, crafting surprise endings for a living. Writers of screenplays, writers at the dawn and dusk of their careers, letter writers, graphomaniacs, poets, drafters of Last Wills and Testaments—all used the services of Ben Mendelssohn, righter. In intellectual circles he was known as an epilogist; among laymen he remained anonymous, never once asking for his name to appear at the close of the work he sealed for others. Over time, experts were able to recognize his signature touches and, within their own literati circles, to admit to his genius. Marianne, who recognized his talent from the start, had a keen distaste for her husband's enduring anonymity, but he, chuckling, would ask, "Do you know any famous tow-truck drivers? All I do is drag miserable writers out of the mud."

After his wife's funeral, Ben asked his friends to let him be. At first they ignored his requests, stopping by his house and leaving messages on his machine, even though he had made clear, from the moment his wife had been tucked into the folds of the earth, that he had no interest in salvation. He lived reclusively, and they, in turn, stopped harassing him, convinced that he meant for his mourning to be a private affair. At their weekly get-togethers, they would bring him up and discuss his antics in the past tense of the posthumous, occasionally wondering what he was up to in the present. It took some time before they realized that they were, in a sense, simultaneously mourning both Ben and Marianne, who, in death, had stolen the refreshing animal blue of her husband's wide eyes. The day she died, his enormous pupils narrowed, his eyes dimmed, and his muscles seemed to release their hold on his frame, sinking his shoulders, curving his back, pointing his forehead downwards. His hands, limp at his sides, told a tale of detachment. Their friends tried to bring back the old Ben, the live Ben, but were forced to make do with alcohol and nostalgia, trudging down the alleys of memory and avoiding the cross-streets of today, which were guarded by a mute wall, a wall of no-comment.

And then, out of the blue, the invitations arrived and put an end to their exile. A sign of life! Ben was back from the dead. They met immediately to discuss a delicate question—what to get a dead woman for her birthday? The poetic friends pushed for something Marianne would've loved; the practical ones advocated for a gift for their cloistered friend. After three packs of cigarettes, 26 bottles of beer and 15 variations on the word idiot, they arrived at a decision. No gift could make Ben happier than a painting by Kolanski

Kolanski's lovely wife turned out to be the perfect hostess. She did not ask for their names or their intentions, led them to a living room lined with artwork, served fruit and soft drinks, and then excused herself to call her husband from his backyard studio. His arrival brought Ben's friends to their feet. The great Kolanski had put his work aside, crossing the room quickly in his electric wheelchair.

His black eyes filled with disgust. "Who are you and why are you eating my fruit?" he boomed.

His wife told him to settle down, but he lashed out at her. "What do you want from me? Maybe they're murderers. She opens the door for anyone. What would you do if they were terrorists?"

His wife smiled tenderly. "As you can see my husband suffers from paranoia." "When we're butchered, will you still call me paranoid?" he barked.

"Can't you see that these people are harmless?" she pointed to them, rolling her eyes to the ceiling.

"We are..." Kobi, the self-chosen representative of Ben's friends, began, before losing his nerve at the sound of the artist's hate-doused voice, "Art students? Art teachers? Art critics? Artists? I can't stand any of them."

Tali, Kobi's wife, cleared her throat. "Mr. Kolanski, we have nothing to do with the art world."

The artist swiveled in her direction and shouted, "What do you want?"

"Mr. Kolanski, we have a very close friend, his name is Ben. He has always admired your work, never missed an exhibition. A year and two months ago his wife Marianne died. They loved like children. The kind of love you don't see every day. Ben mourned her so intensely he severed ties with the outside world. Till yesterday. Yesterday we were all invited to her birthday party. We thought about what would make the best present and came to a decision that nothing would make him happier than a portrait of him and his wife, drawn by his idol... we know that..."

"Ok, I've heard enough," the artist said, "You want me to paint your wacko friend and his dead wife. Love conquers all and all that shit. She's dead, he's alive, and they're still in love. Kitsch. Camp. Colors. Romance. Get out of my house or I'll vomit on you."

"Rafael!" his wife called, giving his chair a kick and stiffening her lips.

"Oh, of course," he mocked, "you're probably moved by this nonsense, right? Think about it Bessie. If I were dead, would you be happy to get a portrait of the two of us?"

She responded at once, “Absolutely.”

“Absolutely,” her husband mimicked, “but not for one moment do you consider what he will do with this portrait? Shove it up his ass? Stare at it all day? And since when do I paint portraits? I’ve never done a portrait. That’s what cameras are for. I don’t believe in portraits. They stifle creativity. They habituate the mind to a single paralyzed expression, and over time your loony friend will look at the portrait and forget, more and more, what she really looked like. All he’ll have left of her is a single, awful expression. Listen to me—don’t document a thing! Not a thing! The more a person documents, the faster his memory betrays him. He knows he can rely on his wretched little photo album. You follow? You’ve all grown accustomed to indulgence! You can keep everything, everything, up here!”

Ben’s friends huddled together, exchanging bashful glances. Tali summoned courage, pulled out a picture of Ben and his wife and extended it to the artist. She whispered, “Just in case you change your mind...”

The artist snatched the picture, glanced at it and nodded, “Hmmm... your friend was a lucky man. The woman, on the other hand, must have had some trouble with her eyesight. Or maybe there’s really something special. This is good, like me and Bessie—the flower fell in love with the thorn, that’s the strongest love. The thorn pokes the flower and the flower drugs the thorn. Awake and asleep. Clamorous and quiet. No other love can endure. Two flowers bore each other to death, two thorns prick each other to death, and all the rest are just weeds. I’ll give you some free advice. You say the thorn is celebrating the flower’s birthday? If you love him, ignore him. After all, it’s the woman’s birthday, right? Hers! Any present for him will carry the mark of unnecessary pity, as though you know the present is for him since she’s dead, and in a failed attempt to make things right you’ve tried to skirt the problem with a present that ties the two of them together, like the portrait. Think of the woman, eh? Get something she would like if she were alive. And try to find something she would love and he would hate. As far as he’s concerned, she still exists, so if you get him a present that hints at death, he’ll be offended. That’s my advice. If you take it, great, if you don’t, go to hell!”

As they reached the door he charged after them. “What do you think you’ll do about your friend?”

Tali smiled, “Why do you ask?”

“It’s not me, it’s my ego.”

“We’ll have to think it over.”

The old man growled and slammed the door.

A month later Kolanski’s ego chalked up a victory, which its owner, having suffered a sudden stroke and slipped into a coma an hour after the guests left his house, was regrettably not aware of. Bessie, despairing, took up permanent residence at the small hospital, never once straying from her husband’s side, refusing to heed doctors’ advice and get on with her life, shuddering each time she heard the vile e-word spoken.

During the first nights, she curled up next to the artist and whispered in his ear the kind of syrupy sentences that, had he been alert, would have won her a sharp slap in the face. By the following week, the syrup had dried up and all that remained was a gummy abrasiveness in her throat. Tired, drained of all hope, she looked at her husband with a distant stare and prayed that she too would be stricken. The stroke never materialized and the kindhearted woman, in her third week of waiting, was seized by an unfamiliar rage. She began hurling insults at her husband, chastising him for all lost time, for his appalling selfishness, for his unfinished paintings, for the disappointment sprawled across the empty white plains of canvas, for his devastating laziness, his unconvincing simulacrum of a corpse, a somber flower next to a withering thorn. Certain that the change of tack would help her words pass through the hidden currents of the mechanized life-support apparatus, Bessie launched into long, fertile monologues, tyrannizing him, vowing that if he let go, she would wipe away all traces of his existence, destroy his work, and spread abhorrent lies about him. Seven days later, when she realized that her threats were not bearing fruit, she turned to her husband and said, in a conclusive tone, holding her voice flat, “Rafael, you remember the Edgar Allen Poe story about that cursed house, I can’t remember its name, the one where the owner couldn’t escape, until, in the end, it drove him crazy? You remember what he did? How he and his friend buried his sick sister and how, a few days later, the friend realized, to his horror, that the sister hadn’t been dead and that he had helped bury her alive? I’m sure you remember the story. I say this because as time passes I’m beginning to feel like the crazy owner of the house. What are you asking me to do, bury you alive? Because if that’s what you want, I’ll see it through. But I don’t want your death looming over my conscience. The doctors say you won’t wake up, and I don’t know, it’s hard for me to believe them but I’m starting to. Oh hell, Kolanski, it’s your sleep and my nightmare. What do you want? Their hints are getting thicker by the day. I keep hearing that word. Euthanasia. They say you’re suffering; that with the flip of a switch I could deliver you from this torment. I can’t stand the idea, but maybe they’re right...”

The ward’s head nurse, eavesdropping at the doorway, smiled contentedly. She knew these monologues by heart, knew where they were leading. Within a week and a half at most the woman would come to her senses and after walking the weathered track of deliberation would ask submissively to grant him eternal rest. If unexpected signs of optimism arose, the nurse would gently explain to her where true hope resided. She had, over the past twenty years, already nudged the spouses of ninety nine men and women into proper bereavement, and it was now Kolanski’s turn. After all, ever since she first experienced the wonders of euthanasia, she had vowed that after the hundredth death she would opt for early retirement, secure in the gladdening knowledge that her calling had been answered in full. The fifty year-old nurse saw herself as an angel of salvation, delivering the comatose from the anguish of their loved ones. The other nurses dubbed her The Angel of Death, a nickname that clashed eerily with her frail and fragile bearing.

She left the hospital early in the evening, in no rush to get home. As always, she walked the city's main streets, perfuming herself with the pulse of everyday life, drinking in the notion that all the people in the cars, stores, cafes, restaurants, movie theaters and on sidewalks, this mass of mankind, was not, at this very moment, engaged in the act of love. She walked her usual route, pleased by the sight of mortals immersed in their affairs, urban men and women of the cloth, who, for the time being, kept their chastity belts clasped tight, as did she. Her mind, at this point, still shied away from her sanctum sanctorum. Five minutes away from her house, she crossed the street and approached the final bend in the road, where an untamable, feral pounding erupted in her chest. The rational part of her mind stabbed at her repeatedly, for her childish excitement, for the crudeness of the whole affair, for the fact that a geographic Spot could charge the dusty battery of her heart and fill it to the point where she could almost hear the growl of an awakening engine in her ears, causing her to scan the street, to ensure that no one else had heard the ghastly noise. But no one heard and no one knew.

Two years ago, the bend in the road was just another curve on the way home from work and she had no reason to believe that a health club would be built right there, firmly and unavoidably in her way. And then it happened. Since then, had anyone noticed her, they would have had some trouble interpreting the expression draped across her face—a lethal concoction of embarrassment, paralysis, disdain, attraction, disgust, agony, excitement, jealousy, resentment, indignation, pretension and happiness. For the past two years she had been shuffling past the club, feigning nonchalance as she glanced through the front window, behind which sweaty and sleek men and women exhibited their bodies' achievements. For two years she had been experiencing a tiny pleasurable heart attack, averting her eyes whenever they happened to meet those of any male club member. For two years she'd endured tedious, ten-hour shifts at the hospital in order to reap the reward of five blissful minutes on the walk home. If she could have it her way, she'd be waylaid for a while longer, but she feared that her sinewy heroes would spot her and creep into her forbidden thoughts. So, after five probing minutes, she marched on. Every once in a while, with the arrival of a new member or the disappearance of a regular, a wild sheen invaded her eyes, as if her mind had, with secretarial diligence, filed away every possible twist in the usual plot. A year before, she chose her protagonist. She had been tracking him since then, focusing on his mute attributes. The man frequented the gym every evening, never mingling, devoutly safeguarding his privacy. She was reminded of her first glimpse of him: tall, well-groomed, in his early forties, with brown hair cropped close to his scalp, whimsically spiked; blue, void and immobile eyes; a thick nose, thin lips, and body language that spoke of firmly harnessed sensuality. Over the course of the year, she wondered why the once-scrawny man distanced himself from the humming social scene at the health club, especially as his body revealed its clear intent to join the gym's pantheon of well defined Herculi. To her delight, he did not turn into one of those formidable monsters that treat their bodies like a sacred temple. He kept his humanity, immersing himself

in his demanding workout, determined to carry on with the addictive mission, as though he expected some great reward at the end of the road.

Taking the bend, her eyes widened in surprise. Tonight, for the first time, he was not there, his absence creating a chasm between the perky-breasted blonde to his right and the expressionless blind man to his left.

At nine p.m. the bell rang. One after another, Ben's friends, heavy with longing, poured into the house that had been off limits for a year. Beyond the dozens of balloons, wall decorations, overflowing plates of food, blaring dance music and the enormous sign for Marianne, the guests had no trouble recognizing the familiar guestroom and were delighted to see that the owner had made no changes—the overloaded shelves still groaned under the weight of books, CDs, LPs and videos, and the works of art, so loved by the woman of the hour, were still immaculately strewn all over the house.

Still, his friends struggled to make sense of their old friend's new appearance, wondering what stood behind the dramatic shift and whether it conveyed a specific intent. The masculinity gushing out of every pore of his hardened body did not suit Ben, and not for aesthetic reasons. They circled around him relentlessly, hugging him, treading carefully around the thin ice of Marianne's name. Yet Ben, the life of the party, threw his head back and laughed, open-mouthed, constantly bringing Marianne up, signaling that he was aware of the delicate situation and eager to put everyone at ease. With each passing moment it became clear that Ben refused to accept even the slightest gesture of pity. The blood that drained from his friends' faces—when he joked that Marianne had perfect timing, leaving when she did in order to avoid having to deal with a midlife crisis—slowly resumed its normal course as they began to realize that Ben could only relate to the crushing loss with humor, and so they played along, chuckling on cue when he announced that his wife had found the most original manner in the world to leave a man without hurting his feelings. After an hour of verbal ballet, Ben suggested opening the presents. He failed to conceal the moistness in his eyes when he ripped open the wrapping paper, revealing the newest works from his wife's favorite writers', musicians, and fashion designers. But before the evening was stained with melancholy, he brought his palms together, rubbed vigorously, and said it was about time he revealed his second present for his dear wife. When one of them asked what the first present was, he posed for her, struck a male-model pout, and pirouetted three times, arms extended, enchanted by his own inane performance. "This body, Marianne always wanted me to put some work into it."

His friends, rejoicing at the simple explanation, rose out of their chairs, and clapped him on the back, some of them wiping away tears.

Ben waited for them to settle down and then repeated his earlier statement. He walked over to the window, pulled the curtain aside, and nodded. Before his friends had the chance to fully interpret his actions, their ears picked up the crack of gunpowder from outside and at the sight of Ben, smiling, nodding his head towards the door, they rushed out and stood dumbfounded in the front yard, their eyes

tracing the arc of the fireworks in the sky, the wealth of stunning colors crowning the night with festive circles of light. The eye-and-soul pleasing shades flared across the night sky, drawing hearts and roses, baby blue fountains and emerald gardens, orange suns and regal purple stars. As Ben's friends oohed and aahed, the neighbors came out of their houses and joined them, enjoying the breathtaking pyrotechnic display on the eve of an ordinary day.

But it was not, the friends learned, a regular evening, nor was it an ordinary day. Twenty exhilarating minutes later, they filed back into the house to thank Ben for the generous display but were rudely denied the chance. Ben lay in a puddle of blood, seeded with parts of his brain. In his right hand he held a warm gun and in his left a note, asking them to open the fridge and take out the towering birthday cake with the maple syrup script that read "And They Died Happily Ever After..."

2. Other World Orders

Welcome to the Other World. First, we would like to extend our deepest condolences to those you have left behind. We sincerely hope they realize that no harm will be done to you here. If they think otherwise, they will simply have to wait their turn and see the error of their ways. Surely, you will be pleased to note that, as opposed to the previous world, which you entered without any instruction or orientation, we offer several prefatory comments as you stand here at the gates of your renewed existence. We promise not to carry on at great length, offering merely that which is essential for you to get the most out of this world, to suck the marrow out of death.

Two brief clarifications before we commence: For those of you worried about scars, souvenirs, or remnants from the events that brought you to this world, allow me to ease your minds. When the light goes on and you look at your body, you will, I assure you, be pleased with its fine state. All praise to our reconstructive surgeons and various somatic artisans. Each and every one of you has come through the Other World's O.R. on your way here. You've all been outfitted with a brand new immune system and undergone a full-body tune-up, including repair work on defects and disabilities. Unfortunately, we are not able to fully repair birth defects; those suffering from congenital deformities, however, will be happy to hear that we have installed microscopic tactical devices that will allow you to dispense with your disabilities for the duration of a year. At the end of the prescribed term, we ask of, say, the blind, to report to the See No Evil clinic in their city, where their artificial eyes will be replaced with a new pair. The deaf will report to the Hear No Evil clinic, the dumb to the Speak No Evil clinic, the anomic and the tasteless will report to the Different Strokes clinic, the mentally challenged and disabled will report to the Artificial Intelligence lab, and those suffering from physical disabilities will report to the Spare Parts lab. As for all of the others, shed your worries. Any disease you suffered from in your life, congenital or acquired, has been excised from your system with death. In our world, disease is nonexistent, and health is no cause for concern.

Our apologies to doctors, nurses, researchers and others in the field of medicine, but if you wish to continue practicing in your respective fields, you'll have to take a series of exams, after which, if you pass, you will be posted at one of the six aforementioned clinics, or at one of the many thousand reconstruction labs described earlier.

The second clarification pertains to language. Since you speak so many different tongues, we have installed a microchip in your brains—Babel—which contains more than 100 languages and a thousand dialects. Whenever you feel like speaking with someone in a once-foreign language, you will find that you are fluent, even eloquent. Owing to our belief in candor and honesty, we've not forsaken the crasser trends of the tongue, offering a series of twenty curse words which will be at your disposal during rare moments of rage. Do not deduce from this that we support verbal violence. We simply prefer you swear rather than strike. It's your responsibility to visit the multilingual labs once a year to update your chip, lest your vocabulary in

the unpracticed tongues dwindle and your circuits start to short out your conversations.

Apologies to the translators, transliterators, language teachers and others in the field, but if you wish to continue practicing in your area of expertise, you will have to take a series of tests, which, if you pass, will enable you to work in the multilingual labs, making the necessary updates in language, particularly in the realm of slang, and keeping abreast of the changes instituted by the academies of language.

And now several facts pertaining to our world:

1) In light of the devastating results of the financial system in your previous world, it has been decided that here, in this world, currency, in all its forms, be abolished. We urge you not to seek it out. It simply does not exist. If you are interested in acquiring a certain item, go to the nearest store and ask the “salespeople” for assistance. They will provide whatever it is you seek, for free. Fear not, there is enough to go around. If it is hard for you to accept the system in our world, we shall clarify and elucidate: those of you who choose to work in your fields, or to undergo a career change, will not be receiving monetary compensation for work performed. This ensures that your occupation will be a labor of love. Soon enough, you will realize that the rewards in our world are great. The non-monetary system spawns creativity and, since you have all the time in this world at your disposal, there is no choice but to engage in activities that compensate you with, well, love.

To the merchants, bankers, entrepreneurs, economists, brokers, mint workers, coin makers, counterfeiters, misers, rainyday-savers, big spenders, materialists and others in the field—our apologies.

2) In accordance with our devotion to candor, purity, and maximum freedom, all residents of this world are naked. When the exposed outweighs the concealed, people are infinitely more trusting, developing a reputable, honest society where costumes, masks, and other props are unnecessary. Moreover, studies have proven that nudity markedly reduces the rate of violence. Before moving on to the next matter at hand, we have a simple request, which will not be elaborated upon due to security concerns: now and again you will bump into people who are clothed; please do not mingle with them or disturb them. To the fashion designers, models, tailors, cobblers, seamstresses, queens of haute couture and all other members of the garment and shoe wear trade—our apologies.

3) Good news for the vegetarians among you. Since in our world everyone has successfully undergone the death stage, there are no bodies, no carrion, no roadkill. From this you can safely surmise that the only type of food you will not be eating here is flesh. Hunting is absolutely prohibited. Bon Appetite.

4) Housing. As you will soon see, the contours of this world are not easily grasped. In order to avoid a population explosion caused by a dizzyingly large aggregation of the

dead, the Other World has been built in four dimensions. You are familiar with geographic parameters that measure length and width. This world is characterized by retroactive time dimensions, enabling it to house all of the world's dead since the dawn of humanity. Place is time, confusing as that may sound. Simplifying matters, all of the dead people in this room, 9,568 in number, passed away on June 21, 2001 and therefore live on Circle 21, in the city of June 2001. Each and every one of you has been provided with living quarters in the skyscrapers on June 21 Circle, which serves as a type of neighborhood. Each skyscraper has 1,000 housing units, divided into 24 floors. Each door bears your initials. The hour of your death determines your floor. For instance, someone who died between one and two in the morning will live on the first floor; someone who died between two and three will live on the second floor, and so on. You are not obligated to live in your specified quarters but if you do, order will prevail. In general—even if you do decide to change your place of residence, your address will be yours forever. At the close of the lecture, as you leave the room, a guide of ours will escort you to the circle and assist the bewildered in finding their new quarters.

5) Transportation. In our world there is but one kind of mechanized vehicle, the multi-wheel—a five-hundred seat bus that will take you from the central station in your city to the destination of your choice. In order for our paved roads not to be overburdened, all other vehicles have been banned. To the drivers, chauffeurs, mechanics, grease monkeys, off-road enthusiasts and Formula One fanatics—our apologies.

6) Entertainment and Recreation. At your disposal is an awesome array of entertainment options, including plays, movies, concerts, operas, galleries, libraries, indoor courts, outdoor courts, grassy fields, playgrounds, restaurants, cafes, pubs and nature reserves. We direct your attention to the video rental shops across town, where you can find, along with the usual selection of movies and TV shows, a series of special tapes chronicling your former life. If you want to watch them, you must use your personal identification code, in other words, your thumbprint. Upon arrival at the window of the Vie-deo you'll be asked to push the request button. Present your thumb. Within ten seconds you'll receive your selected video. Each year of your life is documented on a different tape. If, for instance, you'd like to watch your twentieth year, then push the button marked 20 on the console's calendar. There's no need to return the tape of life to the shop. Since we support each person's right to privacy the Vie-deo will bar all attempts at identity theft. Our apologies to the peeping toms and those who lived dull lives. Moreover—and this next comment is directed at the fingerless or the thumb-less—your artificial thumb is equipped with a unique print that will be considered your identification print, and yours alone.

7) The Godget. You wear the Godget around your neck. It is the size of a calculator and it resembles a remote control. The Godget has six buttons for your convenience.

Each button has a function that allows you to determine the conditions of your renewed existence:

Button 1—Day and Night, determines your favorite part of the day. One click—dawn. Two clicks—morning. Three clicks—afternoon. Four clicks—dusk. Five clicks—evening. Six clicks—night.

Button 2—Weather, setting your preferred climate. One click—zero degrees Celsius—snowy. Two—ten degrees, cold but not rainy. Three—ten degrees, cold and rainy. Four—fifteen degrees, chilly with a stiff wind. Five—chilly, no wind. Six—fifteen degrees, drizzling. Seven—twenty degrees, warm with a gentle easterly. Eight—twenty five degrees, warm and dry. Nine—twenty five degrees, warm and humid. Ten—thirty degrees, desert-dry. Eleven—thirty degrees—a wet sauna. Twelve—other.

Button 3—Sleep, determines your preferred mode of sleep. One click—eight hours of dream-free sleep. Two clicks—eight hours of sleep plus dreams. Three—cat nap. Four—two hours of light sleep. Five—twelve hours of stone cold dream-free sleep. Six—twelve hours of sleep with dreams. Seven—eternal sleep.

Button 4—Daily updates from the previous world on matters of: one click—news. Two clicks—art. Three—sports. Four—science. Five—other.

Button 5—Daily updates from the current world on matters of: one click—news. Two clicks—art. Three—sports. Four—science. Five—other.

Button 6—The Telefinger, similar to the telephone you all know, is operated by fingerprint. It is endowed with an enormous amount of memory and can collect up to one hundred thousand potential fingerprints. If you'd like to call a certain individual all you need is for that person to leave his or her fingerprint in your device and it will remain in your contacts page forever.

It's important to recall that each gadget responds only to its owner.

8) Last comment. In two minutes you will hear the public address system. Its job is to inform the citizens of this world that new citizens of the old world have arrived. The Announcer calls the names of the newly arrived so that veterans of this world can meet their loved ones, if any such exist. We request that you stay in the room for two additional hours in order to allow the old timers ample opportunity to make it here and welcome you. We truly hope that our comments have been helpful and illuminating. We wish you a happy and satisfying death. Welcome to the Other World.

When the screen darkened and the naked girl faded from view, the room filled with light, forcing all present to rub their eyes and blink repeatedly. It was one of those rare and unrepeatable moments, pure and wondrous, during which 9,568 naked people lay on the floor, stunned into deathly silence. Ben was the first to come to his senses. Like everyone else, he was surprised, electric with anticipation, but unlike the other 9,567 freshly dead, he was not in shock. He smiled, content. He knew it. Well, part of it. Even in his wildest dreams he hadn't imagined any of the shades of details

that had been laid out by the gorgeous woman in the introductory talk, but what he had known—that death was not the end—sufficed. Pulling the trigger was like an express ticket to the other side of life. To Marianne. All he had to do now was wait for the doors to open.

A metallic voice came over the loudspeaker and began intoning the names of those present in alphabetical order, its diction sharp and precise. It was funny, Ben thought, to look at the thousands of naked bodies, speechless amazement stamped on their faces. Funnier still were their bewildered awakenings and the way the PA system triggered a laughable herd mentality. As their names came over the loudspeaker each person in turn nodded and said “yes” in an array of languages, as though the Announcer had come to take attendance in school, summer camp or a military barracks. Shock was still apparent. Ever since they remembered themselves they had been taught to expect to reach one of two places or none at all. Anything but this strange place. The more Ben tried to bottle it up, the more the laughter tickled his insides and climbed towards his vibrating Adam’s Apple, until, at last, their goggle-eyed expressions made it spring forth. Ben rolled on the floor, reveling in the disappointment of the heathens and the greater astonishment of their sworn foes, and, had a fifty year-old woman not shattered the silence, shrieking that, “you can see my everything,” he would have continued laughing for a while. Luckily for her, her best friend was partner to their final journey. She soothed her, hugged her close, and pointed all around, intoning, in extreme momminess, “It’s okay, everyone can see everyone else’s everything...”

Ben examined his body. A warm wave washed over him as he considered the thought that in less than an hour he would see Marianne, and probably the others. The second time he heard the Announcer call his name his heart shifted gears, keenly aware that she waited on the other side of the doors.

When the last of the names was called, Ben was first to his feet, his eyes boring into the white double doors as if the intensity of his stare alone could pry them open, his hands rubbing one another in mounting joy, his body alive with surging enthusiasm. Another minute passed before everyone realized the magnitude of the moment, calling at the doors excitedly, huddling and pushing as though only some of them would be allowed to leave. Ben turned his head and was about to hammer the guy next to him, who was relentlessly jostling for position when the doors opened with a soft wheeze. Turning back around, his eyes widened, his smile shriveled, and the tremor that had been coursing through his body went limp

Translated from the Hebrew by Mitch Ginsburg