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From the novel *We Were the Future*

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We were always telling ourselves our story.

Compulsively. Out loud. All the time. Sometimes we got tired even before we began, but we still told it for hours. We listened to each other intently. Because every time we told the story we learned new details. Even years later, when we were no longer there.

For example, we hadn't known that some of the kids from the Pine group, who were five years older than we were, worked with the cowboys. And that they lived in an enclave of Hungarian rural life within our kibbutz. We hadn't known that instead of saying good morning and good night, they said *lofes* (a horse's prick). We hadn't known that Itai, one of the Pine group, freely rode a horse around our hills when he was only six years old.

The stories were told only orally, contrary to all written rules. They rose from the lawn sprinklers that surrounded the dining room, from the scorched remains of our Crusader fortress, from the cracks of the beautiful, narrow stone sidewalks. We told our stories with shining eyes. We said, "It's unbelievable that they used to slaughter the cows on the ramp, right in front of us, that they used to decapitate the chickens like it was nothing at all," but we spoke as if those were the best years of our lives.

And they really were the best years of our lives, dipped in gold, precisely because we lived in below zero temperature in the blazing heat of an eternal sun. We greeted each new day with eagerness and curiosity. We were wide awake in the morning and wide awake at night. We skipped and ran from place to place, our hands sticky with pine tree resin and fig milk. We were so close to each other, all day and all night. Yet we knew nothing about ourselves.

We always told our story, even then, in the children's house on nights when the full moon glowed orange in the sky. Even then, day and night, so we could sleep, so we wouldn't sleep, we'd sit in the corridor at the doors to our rooms or on our beds and exaggerate to death the stories of our city vacations with our biological families (we traveled with our mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers. For a week, we were a city family, dressed in the fancy travel clothes that were handed down from one child to another for traveling to the city). When we came back, each one separately, from the kibbutz apartment on Sheinkin Street in Tel Aviv, we told each other about the same Medrano Circus we all went to. Except that the night we were at the circus with our biological family was different from the other nights – that night, the lions escaped from their cage, the tightrope walker fell off the rope – that's what we said. We told each other stories that were totally unrelated to reality.

Sometimes, after we'd left the kibbutz, we tried to tell our story to city people. We weren't able to get it across, neither the plot nor the tone. Our voices grated like the off-key recorder playing of our childhood, too high or too low. We gave up in the middle. The words fell, hollow, between us and the city people the way the stitches fell from our mothers' knitting needles as they sat silently beside their talking husbands during the Saturday night kibbutz meetings.

We spoke in the plural. That's how we were born, that's how we grew up, from the hospital and forever. Our horizons were strange, bent.

From the moment we were released from the hospital, they never tried to

separate us. On the contrary, they joined us, glued us, welded us together.

But that being welded together wasn't the main thing, even if people who talk about their childhood on the kibbutz sometimes think it is. It was merely a byproduct of the experiment with socialism (the decision regarding communal sleeping arrangements was taken in 1918 and applied to all the kibbutzim, except for some of the older ones – Degania Aleph, Degania Bet and Ein Harod – who opposed it. They were exempted. Degania was there first, even before the system and the regulations).

Their intention wasn't to weld, but just the opposite, to separate, to separate the children from the oppressive weight of their parents, who would pamper them and impose their wills on them with mother's milk and father's ambitions. To separate and protect the children from the bourgeois nature of the family. "We'll change henceforth the old tradition," as the Internationale proclaimed, and a different, more just and egalitarian world would rise, like a phoenix, from its ashes. That was their declared intention and hope – that the new child would grow into a new kind of person. The longing of some of the kibbutz children for the family they never had was the longing for an idea we had no inkling of, like, for instance, the longing of the Jews in the Diaspora for Jerusalem.

I was in the second grade when I saw an adult wearing pajamas for the first time. It was my father, who had fallen asleep during the afternoon shift. We went to our parents' rooms every day from five-thirty to seven-twenty in the evening, a total of one hour and fifty minutes (till the seventh grade, when they sent us away to an educational institution in Evron). At five-thirty that day I went into their room without knocking (we didn't knock on any doors, and ours were always open twenty-four hours a day – after all, there was nothing to hide; the houses belonged to all of us, they weren't a bourgeois possession to be guarded and fortified), and he was asleep in bed wearing pajamas. I ran outside, my pulse racing, and yelled that my father was dead. He's dead. Someone saw me on the sidewalk and, concerned, went inside to check. Zvi N. is not dead, Zvi is sleeping. That's how grown-ups look when they're sleeping: they lie quietly on their beds, their faces to the wall, their backs to us, wearing enormous pajamas and covered with a piqué blanket.

Our story appeared to be only a plot, a plot that was the system, which suited neither children nor adults. Our parents lived alongside it and we lived under it. No one actually lived inside it because it was not meant to house people, only their ambitions and dreams. But we and our parents tried with all our hearts to live inside it; that was the experiment. Our system couldn't be satisfied. We were in awe of it, and we knew that we would never totally succeed. We worshipped it day and night, the older generation (our parents) in the hundreds of vacation days they accumulated, the fruit of their endless labors. And we in the fields, in the dining room, in the children's house. Everywhere.

We knew nothing about the grown-ups' lives, neither about their waking hours nor about their sleep. They inhabited a different planet from ours.

We moved in front of each other like two rows of dancers who grew closer and farther apart from each other in the measured steps of the Friday night dances held in the dining room. We with our flowery group names: Narcissus, Anemone, Squill, they with their group names, the names of their groups, which represented the fulfillment of their ideals: The First of May, Stalin, Meadow, Workers. We with our first names, fresh with dew and raindrops: Yael, Michal, Tamar, Ronen. They with their names recently Hebraicized from the Hungarian: from Freddie to Zvi, Aggie to Naomi, Latsi to Itzhak.

We existed in parallel universes – we lived with the Children's Society, our parents with the grown-ups.

We moved in large masses, like a flock of birds, like a herd of zebras, always in two large groups. All the children went together to their daily five-thirty visits, walking each other to their biological parents' houses, and one hour and fifty minutes later, at seven-twenty, we walked back along the same paths with our parents, who returned us to

the children's houses.

We ate our supper in the children's house. They ate theirs in the dining room.

Even before then, right after we were born, we were sent straight from the hospital to the babies' house, to the *metapelet* who was waiting there for the mothers. They used to come to nurse together, sitting one next to the other, always, at the same time. The synchronization was meant to guarantee that no children got more. Not less and not more. The parents arrived in flocks at bedtime too, for the quarter of an hour they were allowed. Not all of them came, because bedtime was the same in all the children's houses, and apart from that, many of them were busy building the kibbutz, sitting on committees. We moved before them with wheat sheaves in our hands on Rosh Hashanah, we acted out *Hadgadya* on Passover, threading our way among the long tables to the stage in our festive clothes. We came together in the well-orchestrated choreography, unknowingly following the instructions in the loose-leaf binders containing detailed plans for celebrating the holidays that were sent to all Hashomer Hatsayir kibbutzim and then adapted by the Holiday Committee to suit its particular kibbutz. We made fleeting incursions into their night lives on holidays and left "with timbres and with dances [...] the horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea," in the unique steps created for us by Nira (but all kibbutz children were doing the same thing at exactly the same time, celebrating the Hashomer Hatzair Pessach Haggadah). We danced before them on the lawn, at end-of-year school shows, and on the kibbutz holiday we sang "We're building a kibbutz of beauty, the likes of which you never did see, the likes of which you never did see."

They, the adults, sang too. They sang in harmony in a choir, danced the Chassidic dances that were danced at weddings on all Hashomer Hatzair kibbutzim, without a rabbi (the couples went to the Rabbinat in Nahariya, got formally married and came back for the parties so that the rabbi wouldn't set foot on the kibbutz, so that their religion wouldn't touch our religion).

Four couples get married. The grown-ups dance and we stand there with wreaths on our heads, large branches forming a gate for the pairs of chosen children, and we sing Kadya Molodovski, the city woman whose words accompanied our lives, like a melody: "Open the gate, open it wide, like a golden chain, we'll go inside: father and mother, sister and brother, groom and bride, in a chariot we all will ride."

We sang, we danced, we played the recorder, the mandolin and the cymbals, and when the artistic program was over, we all went back to our places. The lawn emptied out, the door to the dining room closed behind us, and we returned to our little world in the Narcissus house with its little bathrooms, its little beds, its little tables, surrounded by the Children's Society – Anemone under us and Terebinth above us. We were happy.

At night we dreamt about the heroes of Eric Kästner's stories that our *metapelet* read to us from nine till nine-twenty every evening, sitting in the corridor, only her voice audible, we in our beds. Noriko-san, the little girl from Japan was exactly our age.

Sometimes our dreams were chaotic. Scary stories we were told remained hanging above us like a black cloud. The *metapelet* said good night and left, closing the door behind her, and we were awake. Frightened. As if the Red Everlasting flower pin that we loved with every ounce of our being had penetrated the white shirts we wore on holidays, piercing our skin. And we waited for the light to come so we could run outside. We were always allowed to escape from classes, as in enlightened countries where prisoners who escape are not tried because it is the nature of man to try to escape from prison, to be free. In the middle of our lessons, we sailed on boards in our reservoir pond. Sometimes we got up at night, sat at the doors to our rooms and spoke or played. We couldn't fall asleep. Once, we lit a bonfire in our dining room and went back to our beds. There were no grown-ups in our world at night.

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Actually, the story of our creation, the creation of the new world, never happened. Maybe that was why we told it to ourselves over and over again. We didn't have a written language or one that we could use to translate our lives for the city people.

We thought that multitudes would join us. Groups from Hashomer Hatzair, volunteers from overseas, workers of the world. We didn't know that in 1960, we were born to a star whose light had long since died and it was now on its way to the sea. We didn't know that the kibbutz movement had been at the height of its prestige during the Wall-and-Tower period in the 1930s, and that before the establishment of the state in 1947, the kibbutz population was the highest it would ever be – 7% of the entire Jewish population. In '48, we were already decreasing, and in the '70s, we were only 3.3% of the entire population.

We didn't know that our star illuminated only itself. We thought that we were growing and building.

We were born in 1960 on Kibbutz Yehiam, the most beautiful kibbutz in the world – green with pines, purple with Judas trees, yellow with broom plants – founded in 1946 on a hill below a Crusader fortress. We were born to the Narcissus Group. We were sixteen children in Narcissus, eight boys and eight girls. We were a gentle group, most of us born to older parents, the Hungarian founders of the kibbutz who built it together with an Israeli group of Hashomer Hatzair.

We said the names of the children in our group quickly, all strung together, in order of age. There was also the alphabetical order of surnames, the bourgeois order that could only be used by strangers who didn't know anything, or by doctors, when for instance, we were waiting our turn to see the dentist who came from Nahariya or the Krayot near Haifa. In an indifferent tone, he used to dictate to Miriam Ron, who was in charge of the clinic, the bad news that was repeated every year: seven cavities, or nine, or twelve. We had so many cavities and so few sweets. And we all wore braces made for us by the orthodontist. We also waited on line for him until Miriam called us in the alphabetical order of our surnames, and he too came from Nahariya or the Krayot.

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We hadn't exactly chosen the name Narcissus, even though we did ultimately vote for it, unanimously, in the first grade. The group's name went with us everywhere – it hung on the bulletin board and was written on the name tag sewed onto our clothes in the *communa*, the clothing supply room. Every group had its own color and its own Roman numeral. We were brown, and our number was X.

When we chose the name, we still weren't familiar with the rules. We didn't understand that we had to have the names of flowers or something else in nature. When we were born, there were already about 120 children on the kibbutz, divided into groups by age. And although the groups before us were called Rock, Grove, Cyclamen, Pomegranate, Pine, Oak and Terebinth, we still didn't understand. We never noticed.

We suggested a variety of names, most of them ending with "Gang." The Explosion Gang," "The Forest Gang," and all the other adventurous sounding names. The *metapelet* directed us, at first gently, then more firmly to the world of flowers until we fell into line and chose Narcissus. I don't remember the name of the other flower we were considering; I think we already realized that it didn't matter if we were Narcissus, Anemone or Chrysanthemum – the names given to the groups that came after us. We understood that it was like choosing white or carrot-orange sandals that had the same shape.

Other kibbutzim like ours throughout the country, from the Galilee to the Negev, chose the same names. And we all dreamed about Noriko-san, the little girl from Japan.

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Fishel from Nahariya was the kibbutz barber.

Every once in a while, at intervals that we could not understand, he would come to us, the Narcissus Group. Amongst ourselves, we called him Dr. Fishel, maybe because of Dr. Zuriel, the kibbutz doctor, who also came from Nahariya, and Dr. Pollack, his replacement who also came from Nahariya, and Dr. Lieber, the dentist. We thought that maybe everyone in Nahariya was a doctor. But Fishel wasn't a doctor; nor was he one of the Nahariya Yekkim, the Jews of German descent who lived in that city. He was Fishel the Barber, and he lived in the transit camp next to the Nahariya hospital.

We hated having our hair cut, but we suffered mainly from Fishel's lies. It never occurred to us that you could lie without blinking an eye and even repeat the same lies over and over again. We sat in regular chairs for our haircuts. There were no adults around and we really didn't understand the order in which we were called. Whenever it was another child's turn, the sheet was flapped around his shoulders like a bib, quickly, and there wasn't a lot of time to be afraid. It was clear that after he left us, Fishel moved on with his equipment to cut other children's hair. Only much later did we learn, almost by chance, that all the professionals – the barbers, doctors, dentists – worked not only with the children, but with all the kibbutz members. They came, worked for a flat rate, and left.

As he worked, Fishel asked each child what he wanted: balloons? candy? Then he memorized each answer (or so we thought) and promised to bring balloons or candy on his next visit. That's how it was every time. And he never brought anything. But we believed him each time and cried with disappointment when no gifts arrived the next time either. Fishel, after all, came from Nahariya, a city that was all candy and chocolate-coated bananas in the stores and rolls and butter in Hans and Gila's café. Enchanting coaches drawn by horses rolled along Haga'aton Boulevard whisking passengers from one place to another. All the best things in the world were there, and he probably never gave us a thought as he walked past all the display windows.

But Fishel must have hated us much more than we hated him, and he certainly didn't have the money to buy us presents. We didn't even know whether he had children of his own. We didn't know a thing about the homes of our dentists in Haifa and the Krayot; we thought that all the **city** people were rich. We didn't know that they worked at a flat rate and lived in transit camps.

We drowned in a sea of our own sweat. The sounds of the recorders, mandolins and cymbals deafened us. We were burned by the banner of letters that were doused in kerosene and set aflame: "For Zionism, Socialism and the Brotherhood Amongst Nations," like the slogan of the newspaper, *Al Hamishmar* that was put in our parents' mailboxes everyday. But we never connected that to our neighbors in Yanuh, the Druze village visible at the edge of the horizon on the eastern side of the fortress. We used to go hiking there with our teacher, crossing our wadi, the Yehiam stream, hearing about the arbutus and Judas trees, and, in a demonstration of the brotherhood amongst nations, walked up to Yanuh's enormous school for a visit. There, they always gave us brightly-colored candy and invited us to see their classes. We reciprocated by inviting them to visit us. When they came, we gave them wafers. We played soccer. We beat them by so much, 13:1 or 12:0, that we were dizzy with victory for days.

We didn't know that thousands of people lived in Yanuh, that the town had no infrastructure, that they had to study Bialik, the Hebrew poet. They told us, but we didn't study Bialik, so we didn't understand what that meant. We knew nothing. Neither Hebrew nor Arabic. Yanuh was two kilometers away, but light years separated us.

And we knew nothing about our neighbors in the development town of Ma'alot, except that, starting in the seventh grade, we had to help them with their homework once

a week for two hours. We knew nothing about Lebanon on the other side of the border.

We knew nothing about Kabri either, the kibbutz we had to pass on the way to see the doctors in the Kupat Holim clinic in Nahariya. Because Kabri wasn't in Hashomer Hatzair.

We walked around like fakirs, both children and adults, on the surface of a moon nobody wanted to discover. We believed that we would pluck stars and the stars, like fireworks, would light up the skies over all the countries in the world. And workers would march by their light as if they were torches, and equality and justice would descend upon the world. Our legs hurt so much from the effort that we could focus only on the march itself. We forgot who we were bringing equality to, who we were forging peace with and who deserved justice. We drank our sweat and helped no one.

Volunteers used to come to us from all over the world. They came on their school vacations, filled with enthusiasm about what was called "lending a hand," helping us with our work. We played volleyball with them, spoke our broken English, played guitars, tried lying on a waterbed. Look, the world is coming to us, so blond, fair and polite. They worked, took an interest in our lives and then went back overseas. We went on with our lives.

Translated from the Hebrew by Sondra Silverston