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Extract from the novel [Aquarium]

**Prologue**

Say I stretched my socks above my knees. Say you noticed how pretty my legs are, say the skirt above those said legs spins like a bell. And I could even say that you traced the exact manner in which I rose up from the chair and started to walk. Say. Wouldn't you also add something like, Nice legs she's got on her, the deaf one. Yes, definitely, this is what you would have said, as if I were a grasshopper with its ears up its legs.

Because I was, just like that, the pretty deaf girl. The fact presented itself one moment like a cardboard sign hung around my neck. Something you can't take off. For years I have gotten used to being the one who sees but is, herself, invisible, like a ghost under a blanket. Take off the blanket and poof, there's nothing left, only a couple of empty eyes staring at you. But when the blanket was finally removed, this new beauty I had abruptly grown made everybody embarrassed. Because this is how it was, puberty hit like an ocean wave and soaked me and I was suddenly beautiful. Suddenly what had been a mouth too wide and childhood fat turned into something that enthralled others, deaf or no deaf/deaf or not.

Beauty matters. A lot. Like an elevator lifting you up six floors. Say you did not ask for it but then you're a liar. A deaf and a liar. And even that wouldn't be enough. It was never enough. And not only because I was left alone. At that moment, like all the other moments that followed, Dori was already gone. And my notebooks also began to accumulate by habit only, because there was no Dori to read them in secret anymore.

**Part I: I'm Nobody Who Are You**

*I'm nobody! Who are you?*

*Are you - Nobody - Too?*

-Emily Dickinson, 260

**Chapter 1**

Lily and Dori. A dark head next to a fair one. Braids and curls. Red mixed with brown. Four slightly slanted eyes. Chinese almost. The older's a proper girl's name and her sister's a name you would only give a boy. At home they were called *big one* and *small one*, the arm, stretched forward, first marked how tall was *big one*, then her sister. Always in relation to, even when they were apart. But to the world they were never *big one* and *small one*. They were two, and crippled. They had tanned legs, bitten by mosquitoes in summers. In winters they wore boys' short pants, charmless, lacking the fruit molasses, whatever it was that protects the soft bones of children, not necessarily the flesh but that strange, sweet innocence. They did not have it. On most days they wore straw hats that were too big for them, too old for them, the two of them like two black holes.

The hair fell over their faces, but what was there to see, an oily stain on a shirt, a bruised knee. They spoke with words unuttered, but they definitely spoke. They had lots of words. There was *the language*. There was an apple tree standing in the backyard and its fruit worm-eaten. Because—as the story told, and contrary to every climatic reason—an apple tree did grow there. The apples they threw away. The leaves they threw at each other, as if they were under a green canopy, two pixies wedding each other. Lily was brave and Dori scared of everything but still they climbed the highest boughs. Sat on a budding branch and yelled at the moon and the stars. It was not pleasing to the ear. Quite dreary, if you care to know, like rabid foxes. The neighbors shouted and shouted till they gave up, for why rip your throat when Akerman's deaf girls cannot hear you anyway. The neighbors learned, and turned silent. The girls hurled small, hard apples at the backyard cats. They never hit.

Truth be told, the tree belonged to all the neighbors, in eight different apartments in which the lights were turned on each evening, but Lily and Dori were the only ones who climbed it. They did so unbothered, if you ignored the shouting. Perhaps it was pity that made them leave them alone. Perhaps despair. Or it might have been the tree's sour yield that led the neighbors to give up. Be as it may, none of the other children ever came near them, and they did not think that it was strange.

As far as Lily and Dori were concerned, that tree in the backyard was the only thing that made their small apartment tolerable. Low ceilings. Crooked floor tiles. A windowless main room, the buzz of the washing machine drum and sewing machine's tremors they felt with their feet. How stuffy it was in there. Only on top of the apple tree they felt perfectly fine. Two pixies. Two sprites. Deaf. Half-retarded. Analphabetic. Let them be.

When their father knocked on the tree trunk they could feel vibrations climbing up their backs, and hurried home. Sometimes it happened when they saw the lights in the apartment turn rhythmically on and off. That did it. The lighthouse turned on. Both of them carried a key since they were very little, wrapped around their necks. You should be responsible, the whole world told them, you are not sweet and regular enough to let someone else take care of you. Before entering the apartment they checked each other's appearance. Lily's collar was torn in two places, Dori's socks sagged and her braid looked like a mouse's tail. Lily was bigger. When they stood in front of the door it became clear and very much distinct again, even if they called her otherwise. *Big one* smoothed *little one's* eyebrows with a finger wet with saliva, forcefully cleaned a black-greenish stain above her cheek. It did not help. The two of them tried to smooth out the wrinkles in their skirts. Who would do that, climb with skirts. But this was what they wore that day above their pants because the two uncles, their father's brothers, were about to pay a visit. Their father regarded the visit as *necessary evil* (and Dori imagined how someone scribbled those words above the uncles' heads before each visit), but the girls had to look civilized. At least this time.

Of course they could have opened the door themselves, they had a key, but they waited. Finally their mother appeared at the entrance, her face blank, and they followed her inside. Their father's brothers were already sitting there. Their inconvenience splashed in waves all the way to Dori, who saw four hands that found nothing suitable to do. Noah folded his arms, then let go. Ari's hands lay motionless on his knees. Uncle Noah loved making small, clever devices, even though it was not his real profession. One time he built her a tiny bird in a cage, which could jump out of it and open its beak wide. She watched the bird's painted feathers, pasted one by one onto its small body, in admiration. Dori never knew when the bird will come out of the cage, and even though she tried to guess, it never worked. But Noah's main interest was children, making dozens of tiny plaster children who slept inside cigarettes packs and matchboxes. For days after each of his visits, they would find those packs and boxes scattered around the small apartment.

It is possible that Lily and Dori learned how to read *the words* only thanks to the uncles. The same words shaped by the uncles' fish lips. Dori faster than Lily, yes, but both of them could do it and understand, at least when there was enough light and they could clearly see the mouths open and close, the tongue touching the roof of the mouth then let go of it, the lines of teeth. How ugly all all of it was, they often shook with horror and disgust, a kind of nausea mixed with pleasure, like sitting inside in the mouth of a monster without being swallowed. Noah and Ari, for their part, wanted to catch something of *the language*, asking more than once from the girls to teach them, but the lessons never got very far. Again and again Alex demanded that they let them be, after all they are children, not circus animals.

Sometimes Dori thought that while her parents were tall and beautiful and ageless, the uncles were immeasurably old. They were like fish eaten and left on the plate, their bones shining. After one of those visits, which became rarer and rarer, they found two blue winged fish stuck between volumes fourteen and sixteen of the *General Encyclopedia for Teenagers*. The fish were exactly the size of their palms and made of light metal. Their blue glaze could be scratched with the fingernail, but they learned from experience that it wasn't worth it. Their wings shone as if covered with varnish.

For a while they were horrified by the thought that Noah knew how they called them, both of them, the Fish Uncles. "His toys are too sad," Lily decided, bringing her open palm down in front of her face, her face expressing deep sadness, and then, suddenly, rapidly moving her hands, fingers clenched,

back and forth in front of her chest. Finally she pointed at their uncle. But Dori knew that despite her certainty, Lily kept the boxes with the sleeping children in the back of her closet, even the fish she kept (she herself lost it, despite her efforts). Because this is how they were back then, like two open books telling almost the exact same story.

While Noah might have had something special about him, good hands at any rate, Ari, their father's other brother, was small and withered. He had always been like that, slow and straggling, an engineer of machines without a spiritual bone in his body, their father once told them. "The living fish and the dead fish," chuckled Lily when they became a little older, and Dori joined her, opening her mouth wide, like a dog trained how to smile without really getting the joke. But she still felt sorry for him. Now, as he stretched his body on the upholstered checkered chair, she didn't feel sorry for him at all.

The big notebook was laid on the table and the brothers wrote in it in turns, the uncles using disposable pens, the kind that breaks easily, and their father a heavy, cumbersome fountain pen from which only he could elicit letters and ink. Each one of them added his own words, punctuating them with either a full stop or a question mark at the end. More question marks, in Noah and Ari's case. Full stops (though never exclamation marks) set by their father. Following that, silence. An onlooker might have wrongly observe, "three brothers wrote in there," but it was clear that the notebook was the property of Alex Akerman, their father, the eldest brother. The two others were merely hitchhikers. They possessed nothing of their father's awesome, gargantuan power. Dori tried to picture them as children, but she could only see two dwarfs and a giant, a fisherman with fish. Both were born long after he was. They did not have to go through what he had, they vaguely knew, without knowing what, exactly, was the nature of the rivers he had crossed, the ravines. Dad's hands rested in the middle of the notebook like a ship in a paper sea. A moment later he pressed the pen to the sheet and wrote swiftly. His brothers read his words upside down. Dori and Lily knew they shouldn't bother them. Their father's squinted gaze told them that their appearance was outrageous.

Dori could detect a hint of playfulness in Noah's eyes, and she knew that Lily could too. But it was Ari who called them by their names when he turned to them, before their father disproved him with one, unambiguous gesture, and they went to their room, the room which was painted in orange after they both decided that nothing in the world was as pretty as the sunset. Dori came to regret that more than once. She will continue to regret it, but they will never paint the room a different hue.

Their mother was waiting for them there. She sat on Lily's kept bed, with the nicely stretched linen and the teddy bear Lily never bothered to hug. The teddy bear sat and watched them with its glass eyes. There were six dolls, crayons, and an algebra book on Dori's bed, as well as an apple's core and pencil shavings and God knows what else. But all of this was long before Dori learned how to behave, when her bed was the last free zone. So Dori sat down on the bed with all her stuff and Lily remained standing and their mother did not move. They understood that she plans to scold them and then cry. It was her usual look. The tip of her nose was always red. She was a beautiful woman who had once been a true beauty. Prettier than the both of them together, otherwise their father would have never married her. But now, instead of crying, she told them in *the language* that she had a present for them. She used *the language* clumsily. Her hands were very beautiful but slow and heavy when gesturing.

And they really did get a present. A blue coat for Lily and a red one for Dori. They almost never had enough money for new clothes. They were poor, but. No. Not exactly poor. When they had money they chose to invest it in more important things, long-term goals. Their mother had a sewing machine and two perfectly good hands, and most of the time that was enough.

"What for?" Lily asked in surprise, but Dori didn't want to see the answer. She felt bliss. Her mother smiled. The smile looked whole from the front but Dori knew in the back, on the left side, she missed one of her bottom teeth. It'll be a thousand years before they fix it. It was Dori's favorite smile in the world. Her mother, almost not mad, hinted that she shouldn't wear the coat when she is so dirty. She left it on the bed in its silk-paper wrapping. They went to wash their hands. Lily drank water from the cup they used to for their toothbrushes, insisting, as always, that she likes the taste, and Dori laughed so

hard that water came out of her nose. Then they helped their mother to bake oatmeal cookies. It's a two minute job, their mother happily informed them. They served them to their father because his brothers were already on their way out. Lily crossed the room and put some cookies in Noah's pocket. She put one crumbling cookie in Ari's palm, too. Dori knew that their father noticed, he noticed everything, but he didn't say a word. After Noah and Ari left the four of them sat there, nibbling healthy cookies. "A two minute job," their mother repeated happily, and for a split second it looked like her hands were dancing. It was one of the good days. One of the best.

That same night they lay in their beds and made shadows on the wall. They often spoke like this, in shadows, in the night, until they were caught. Dori asked Lily to tell her what she had been like as a baby. Every time Lily objected for a bit then told her about the prettiest baby the world ever saw. "You were so little, they found you in a bag of sugar," Lily said, and Dori laughed. Last time it was a bag of cotton wool. It was a story Lily began to tell her a long time ago, some time after their mother eventually recalled something of her own childhood, and told them that when she was a girl she had thought babies were found in cabbages. That is, they found them in cabbage fields, folded between the leaves. They both understood, because they were not always as stupid as some said they were, that they grew cabbage where she came from. And Dori pictured fields bursting with cabbage heads, with two baby feet sticking out from each of them.

Lily joked about their mother, but Dori believed her a little sometimes. Sometime she thought that she herself might have been born like one of Noah's hand-made children, that she too was found in a cigarette pack or a medicine bottle, but that she, unlike all these other children, opened her eyes. Lily went on with her story, the shadows formed by her agile fingers ran across the wall. She gestures even faster than dad, Dori thought. She stared at the shadows on the wall until her eyes hurt, but she had no intention of missing anything. "You were the most beautiful baby anyone ever saw. Your eyes were purple almost. Nose like a dot. I loved you so and believed you belonged to me only. How I fought with mother over this, you wouldn't believe. Who would've guessed you'll turn into such a witchy-witch." For *baby* she curled her arms into a cradle and touched her earlobe with her finger to signal *earring*, and the witchy-witch was formed out of an imaginary crooked nose, followed by a quick rub of the actual one. She knew that Lily didn't mean what she said, not really, but now her eyes were brown and not purple, and there was nothing left of the sweet baby she had been nine years ago, the baby someone must have gently rocked, the one she forgot but that Lily remembered for her. She hugged the box Noah left her. There was a boy with sand-colored hair inside. She fell asleep.

**So they didn't speak in your house? Anton asked.**

**Dori looked at him. He looked just like the sand boy, his beautiful head lay on his shoulders as if someone might take it off of him in a moment. Of course they did, I already told you. Aren't you listening?**

**He sat on the windowsill in his mother's old house, the one painted white. She didn't really scold him, how could she.**

**We spoke in *the language*, you see?**

**He did not, or else he pretended not to.**

**With your hands, you mean?**

**Dori laughed out loud. Yes, you moron, with our hands. What did you think, that we used the Morse code?**

Imagine a different world. It moves in parallel with your own, like two identical spheres whose motion traces the number eight. But it has a different time to it. A different sense of watchfulness. There are different things to be heard there, the taste of food is more accentuated. Try to stand on both your feet and eat strawberry, a lollipop, grilled cheese sandwich. But you can't. In those days the morning star hadn't turned into the evening star yet, but they both made the same sound. That is, no sound. Nothing was heard. Objects fell down noiselessly. Stones were thrown. Water was running, and silence. The village was still remote and hidden, and what lay beyond it was at the very end of the world, a place where sailors whose paths were drawn by ancient maps fell with their ships down into nothing. Sirens sang to each other and drowned whoever heard their voices or dared to dip their toes in the water. This is how it was back then, when Lily and Dori were still alike. Clearly there were some differences in temper, in the shape of the eyes, when one body began to grow tall while the other insisted on remaining too small for its age, one grinning while the other's joking expression is perhaps only the backdrop for tears. Because Dori always seemed like she was about to cry, even though she didn't. So, yes, there were differences. But both *big one* and *small one* talked with their hands, both grimaced, both had to be exactly what they were. Their ears, if you care to know, were not completely useless. Because despite their parents' obvious discontent, for example, *big one* insisted on wearing earrings, and one day she will return home with two gold earrings in her lobes, piercing her forever. And *small one* liked putting things inside her ears, soft things like cotton wool, which didn't bother anyone actually. And perhaps in another house it would have been the opposite: they would have told *small one* to immediately take this stuff out of her ears and driven *big one* to town, to pierce her ears and choose her first pair of earrings. But not their house. Their father looked at Lily harshly and asked her if she knew whose ears they used to pierce to the doorpost. She didn't know. And Dori only pushed the lint deeper, feeling how the soft turns into hard and the hard into soft.

From the outside it was simpler, better even, to see them as one unit. The deaf sisters, nocturnal pixies, mythological creatures who were destined to make a little noise before sinking into watery chasms; it might have been tempting to throw rocks at them but why bother, when Lily would pick up a stone and throw it back.

The neighbors decided to talk to them. They sat there. They folded their arms. They didn't hear a thing. It was decided that the two were a lost cause and that like daughters like parents, because everyone knows that it all begins at home. They were impenetrable. Inaccessible. A case of severe retardation, someone whispered, and a bird of the sky carried the sound even inside the deaf ear.

Maybe they burst in laughter in the face of that delegation of neighbors. It depends on who's telling the story. Maybe their laughter was a quick, crazy one, the laughter of someone who cannot hear herself. Because time is a thread that can be knotted until what was and what will be become almost one and the same thing. But on that night they remained sitting on the tree. Hanging from it with surprisingly strong legs, their hair falling down, Lily's red mixed with Dori's brown, a curtain through which they saw whatever there was to see. Which wasn't much.

They enjoyed scaring everyone, true, terrorizing the building's tenants who had to take a hurried detour around the tree. They were conquerors and rulers. Queens without a crown. They could have besieged the city on elephants' backs and burn it to the ground, if they hadn't been afraid of fire. It's been a few months since Uncle Noah built them a platform from identical beams which he attached with long nail to where the branches bifurcated, thereby completing their takeover of the tree. This is the world under the moon, said Lily, and Dori agreed, though they only rarely stayed between the tree branches until it was late enough to see the pale moon watching them from above. They stuck their tongues out at whoever dared to come near. Perhaps they spat, too. Be as it may, they appeared in the neighbors' nightmares. They knew what they said about them.

Children know. Girls know. Even if they are deaf as deaf can be. If someone took exception to the sight of two girls on a tree with a crowd of mocking children underneath, the former sticking out their tongues and the latter throwing stones, there would always be someone else around to calm them down, someone to quickly provide the winning, circular argument, "kids will be kids." And someone else would

add, "it's nothing compared to what awaits them. They won't always treat them as kindly as we do around here." At any rate the girls couldn't hear a thing. Silence encircled them like an insulator, like that television button that mutes the whole world.

It felt good and comfy to float on that lie like on a floating mattress in a turquoise pool. And whoever drowned, drowned.

Because, yes, they were terrible. But deep inside they were *model little girls*. There they repeated the words: "They were utterly happy, the little, good sisters, and their mother loved them so; and everyone who knew them loved them and wished only to please them." That is, girls like that really existed. Not them though. Others. Nicole and Claudette. Mirabelle and ReINETTE. Something like this. With an utterly loving mother, with fierce love. Right behind the girls who threw apples, there, almost touching the girls with dirty feet and barbaric manners and the birth defect, because that's what they said about them, they knew it—existed two perfectly well-behaved girls, with perfect table manners. The world was only waiting to serve them pleasures on a silver plate, and they would say in the language of men, with their pink tongues swiftly touching the top of their mouths, *merci merci* and *oh là là*. They came from somewhere in France with royal titles and lace handkerchiefs, with servants and carriages and terrible accidents in which only the poor die. Like Cosette from "Les Misérables", who, as far as Dori remembered, did not die at all. And perhaps no one but Dori saw them that way and maybe Lily abandoned that old game a long time ago, but Dori never forgot: they were both model little girls. And perhaps this is why they were happy. "I beseech you," Dori practiced, trying to form the words with her lips, as the hearing do. "O please, kind sir. If you could find it in your heart to forgive me." She knew how to bow, drop her handkerchief, how to stare bravely towards the horizon, which was in fact the corridor leading to the living room, without even needing smelling salts. One day, she believed, her knowledge will be useful.

Because deep inside her heart (the heart bursting with blood, which continued to work incessantly, filling and emptying as hearts do), she forgot their sticky faces, the faces they always forgot to wash, the hair they never combed (knots and knots instead of silky, smooth hair), the books left in the bathroom to swell with water. There all the tongues they stuck out defiantly melted, and all the eyes rolled at them shut. There they could also leave the faces they both wore like empty masks, to frighten before being frightened themselves. There she forgot the bad hopscotch they played by themselves only, inventing rules on the fly before it grew dark and it was time to go back. Kittens never died in their hands because they could never bring them home, and they trembled and trembled inside the cardboard box in the backyard until they didn't. Deep inside the heart everything was very tender. The cats were combed and pampered and a blue ribbon was tied around their necks, and the two of them were called Dora and Lilith, clean and healthy, with round eyes like dolls that no one plays with, with perfect manners and foreign names that they were finally worthy of. Who would have believed that inside these two disturbed girls against whom all the parents warned their children (they knew they did, they had always known) waited two good, well-mannered, kind girls, girls who drank tea in fine china cups. Even if the others thought them crazy and flawed, they knew what they really were. And this knowledge, everybody knows, was the most precious of all.

Other children lived on their street. What street doesn't have children? The answer is, a sad street. And their street was certainly not a sad one. They were its sad spot, yes, they were. A minor statistical deviation in a street whose children excelled in sports and in their bright eyes. Children who ate fruit and cream only. Whose games involved drawing with chalk on the road, sticks and stones. Children clean and dirty, disturbed and good. Children who gather under the tree until hit with apples and stones. Children who show them with two fingers how easy it is to cut wings. Ears. Anything really. Chip chop. Divide and rule. And what was written earlier, that no one bothered them, was a sweet lie. Yes, they usually preferred not to get involved with them. But it doesn't mean they didn't. It doesn't mean anything.

No one remembers childhood as it really was, bad and difficult and covered with teeth breaking out of the ground. You've forgotten that childhood is a time with more monsters than heroes. And you really imagine that it was pleasant. That the colors were strong. The smells sweet. Adventures were

waiting around every corner, and how many corners there were. You saw toads and frogs, hedgehogs and cats, even if you grew up in the city, in a housing project with a pond nearby that dries up in summers and teems with life in the winter. And the grass and apples smelled so good and the earth smelled good and mother, and in those years it seemed like it would be enough. You played detectives. You caught a thief, conducted yourselves in honesty and courage. You were well-rewarded, and at any rate you think that this is how it must have been. Because even if you didn't dare to go to the pond when the others were there, and even if the air carried stories of children who drowned in the pond, you didn't. Allow me to congratulate you, how lucky you are!

It seems so easy to get up after falling down. So we fall down and get up and forget that we fell or at least clean the earth and gravel from the knees and know, because they taught you, that it's nothing, there's nothing to do, everyone falls. Didn't I fall in my time? I fell, and here I am today. And they did too, because this is their story, not yours, after all. Both Lily and Dori fell and got up. So many times till it looked like it was just their normal gait. They said the deaf have a balancing problem but it isn't true. When they throw a stone at you, you fall. Till you get used to falling. But not from the tree. Never from the tree.

Dori always thought of those children as a cluster. Like a bunch of grapes. They all grew on the same stem, tight and very similar, waiting to ripen and burst of juice and sweetness. And most of the time she didn't think of them. A pity, because if she didn't think, how will she learn? Perhaps Lily thought for her, and also drew conclusions. They needed no one but themselves. They were advanced. They had books and finger dolls and notebooks and *the language*. So Dori didn't bother to think about them. She was only afraid of wolves, and Lily told her, they are just kids, they can never be wolves. And Lily opened her mouth wide to show her that her teeth, half of them still milk, were actually a little pointy. "If there's a wolf around here, it's me," she told her younger sister.

But Dori did not believe Lily any more than Lily believed herself. Dori knew that her sister was a bird at most and definitely not a wolf, and that her teeth was not as sharp as she had hoped. Because the marks Lily left in the world were not very strong. And one time, long ago, when Dori was still as small as a peanut with hands, like a baby kangaroo who must climb up into its mother's pouch to survive, one time Lily came back with her lip open and her shirt collar torn. There was a whole lock of hair missing in the center of her head, a bald patch smooth and round like a coin. And there were unexplained scratches on the arms. And there was also a doll whose eyes were suddenly gouged out and was later abandoned, bed-wetting that returned and brought with it more scolding for immaturity, the rubber sheet fitted. There were signs, though Lily signaled nothing. But she will write everything down someday, and Dori will read it.

When they asked her, and they indeed asked, she said something about a striped dog. Some dog who wanted a cake. But inside her body Dori's blood told her that it was the hearing children. And if someone ate cake, it was them and not some stray dog. Because Lily was never afraid of dogs, even later. After that their parents never forced her to go outside to get some fresh air, to make friends. There was enough air on the tree, "complete photosynthesis," their father admitted. Their parents didn't understand people's desperate need for company anyway. And they invented new ways to speak in, hanging upside down like bats, like old clock pendula, like two who are never afraid. Together they were scared of the women they will turn into when they grow up. Women with no voice and nothing special about them. Like the little mermaid who lost both her tail and her voice and was better off turning into a sculpture.

Sadly, none of them looked very much like Anna, who was beautiful. They always knew that they looked nothing like them, like Anna and Alex. They inherited nothing important from them, neither their father's impressive facial features nor their mother's freckles, profile, or stirring cry. When Dori stood in profile Lily examined her and decided that, yes, Dori does look a bit like Noah. But even if they were both born out of cabbage or found in a matchbox or inside the no-tear shampoo, they could never imagine not being Akerman's deaf girls. And to a large degree, they were right.

Anton looked at Dori, who was again moved by how beautiful he was. Beautiful and lazy. She could see his wealth running in his blood, the obvious pedigree. It was like being given a doll which was too pretty and being afraid it'll be taken from her. Or even to hurriedly lose it herself, break its arm or nose against bad luck. He asked her about her childhood, like he always did during those hours, his arms laying behind his back, very whole. His nose was perfect. He looked like there was no easier and more comfortable position than that in the world, and Dori wondered again how he did that, and decided it was a gift. Dori learned that he felt at home everywhere, even when he decided to openly express his dislike.

He wasn't the first one who wished to hear about her and Lily (though he called her Lilith with an almost whispery "th" at the end of her name, which Dori didn't bother to correct really). Dori knew that he too was after a hidden truth, one which does not necessary stem from her biography but from somewhere deeper, in the bones. A golden vein. When he expressed his interest in her, her advantage stood like a sword drawn out from a stone. Suddenly she had something he wanted except for her body (underneath the shapeless clothes and beyond the low expectations he was careful to express, it was her body he was impressed with again and again).

Dori was small, very small. From a distance it might have seemed like she was still a child. She really did dress like a child who stumbled into a stranger's closet. Wrapped herself in a flood of colorful clothing, geometrical patterns, bumping colors, it always remained a mess. Spotted stockings enveloping two thin legs inside tall boots in the color of spilled wine. Not to mention the bitten fingernails, painted like spring beetles. She cut her bangs herself and drew a black line above each eyelid. The impression she left was excessive but not cheerful. She was tiny but not sweet. Already at the age of nine she knew, her face did not allow it.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Maayan Eitan*