

Warplanes

By Ayelet Tsabari

On the way home from school, three warplanes slice the sky, leaving a trail of chalk across the blue as they head north. Orit squints and cups her hand over her eyes. “F15s again,” she says, disappointed. Her dad flies F16s.

I glance up, say nothing. We’ve been watching warplanes all summer long.

When we get to my building, we throw our school bags on the lawn outside. It’s September and everything seems tired and dull, sucked dry by summer. The grass is yellow and has bald patches of cracked earth. Orit ties her hair into a bun, pulls a deck of cards from her bag and shows off her shuffling skills.

“I think it’s going to rain,” she says.

“But it never rains before Rosh Hashanah,” I say. The air does feel heavy with moisture; it’s like being draped in a sheet out of a washing machine. I pull a card from the pile and discard it, then change my mind and take it back.

“You can’t do that,” Orit says. “Once the card is down, it’s down.”

“You don’t get to make the rules,” I say.

“It’s not my rules,” Orit says.

I put my cards down and get up, brush the grass off my jeans. “I changed my mind,” I say. “I have to go in.”

I skip up the stairs two at a time to the second floor, open the door and yell, “I’m home.”

Mom says, “Don’t leave your bag by the door. Every day I have to pick up after you.”

I drop my bag in my room and go into the living room. I turn on the TV. News. Since the war started they break for news all the time, interrupting shows I love like *Little House on the Prairie*. On the screen a guy from the parliament is saying, “This war is leading Israel into an abyss!” and other members of parliament start yelling at him and waving their hands. I turn off the TV and head to the kitchen. Mom stands by the stove, staring into a pot. She wipes her hands on a towel and sits down at the Formica table to read the paper. I read over her shoulder. The front page headline is a big black box with white letters. Black on the front page means many soldiers died in Lebanon. Red is usually some sort of murder. A bad car accident can go either way. If someone dies from a heart attack or a disease, they put it in the obituaries in the back, in little squares with black frames. That’s where they had my dad’s obituary last spring, next to one sponsored by the factory where he worked that said: “To Sara and family, with you in your grief over the loss of your husband and father.” The front of the paper had a big black headline with a picture of an artillery officer who was blown up by a landmine in Lebanon.

The day my father died I called Orit. I was crying really hard, so at first she couldn’t understand me. She came over and took me outside because our apartment was full of people talking and praying, and women carrying steaming Pyrex. We walked on the neighbours’ fence and I laughed when I lost my balance and almost fell down. Later, I overheard my aunt telling my mom that she had seen me laughing and that it was inappropriate.

Other things that are inappropriate when your father dies: going to weddings or bar-mitzvahs, dressing up all fancy, listening to music really loud, thinking about boys, having fun of any kind.

I get bored with the paper so I walk over to the counter. There's a plate of schnitzels by the stove, layered on top of a paper towel. I touch one, and Mom says, without turning her head: "Don't."

"I'm hungry," I say.

"It's not ready yet."

"It looks ready."

Mom doesn't answer, just flips a page in her newspaper.

She wasn't always like this. Before Dad got sick we talked about things. Sometimes after ballet class she took me for ice cream, and once we drove all the way to Tel Aviv for no reason and had milkshakes on a terrace overlooking the sea. On the way back the roads were empty and we hit a green wave on Jabutinsky, the traffic lights turning in our favour one after the other. Mom opened the windows and cranked the radio way up and we sang from the top of our lungs until my throat got scratchy.

Now, days can pass and the only things she'll say to me are: "Don't touch that," "Dinner is ready," "I need you to get milk from the store." And it's not like I don't try to get her attention. I sit in the kitchen while she cooks, follow her around while she does laundry or cleans. Once, I told her I thought I was in love with Yonatan from my class. I thought it was pretty big news. Silence. Another time I asked, "Ima, do you believe in God?" because I had started to have my doubts. Nothing.

Instead, she makes other kinds of noise. She digs in the pots and pans drawer really loudly, for a long time, like she just can't find the right pan, or bumps the broom into the walls when she sweeps, or drags chairs on the floor instead of lifting them. When I still believed in God, I used to make deals with him to bring Dad back. I promised I wouldn't watch TV on

Shabbat, mix dairy and meat behind Mom's back, or steal money from her purse. When that didn't work, I offered up Mom. If I had to have one parent, I wanted one who saw me.

Now I don't bother talking to God. I was hanging out in the empty lot behind our house not long after dad died. The shiva was over. People stopped coming, life went on. I was angry at everyone. Especially God. I threw cans into the abandoned house at the edge of the lot, ripped weeds from the ground and kicked stones. Then I said aloud "God is an asshole." I looked up but nothing happened, and suddenly I saw that the sky was just a sky, and there was nothing there, just clouds and planes.

I walk to my room, slam the door and turn the radio on loud to listen to the top ten chart on Reshet Gimel, but it's the news again. The anchor is reading in a very serious voice: *Captain David Yehu, Sergeant Tal Bergman, Lieutenant David Sherman*. One time last year I actually heard Michal's dad on the list. The next day at school, the teacher told us what happened. It was a big deal when he died, because he was a war hero, so they wrote about him in the paper and had a special ceremony in the community centre with a big picture of him, like a fold-out poster from a teen magazine. Unlike regular people, who get buried covered in a white sheet, Michal's dad got buried in a coffin, in the cemetery's Army lot, which looks like a garden, with flowers and trees. My father's lot is all stone. Michal's family got lots of money because they were now a bereaved Israeli Defense Force family, and the kids were IDF orphans. IDF orphans get to go to a special camp every summer in a nice kibbutz by the beach, with lawns, a pool and a water park, and cool activities like a makeup-for-film workshop and flamenco dancing, all paid for by the army. I wish my father died in the army, instead of in a hospital. There is no Remembrance Day for people who died of a weak heart.

The teacher made us go to the shiva at Michal's house and afterwards Orit and I walked home and Orit was quiet the whole way. It was already dark. You could hear people's TVs playing the opening jingle for the evening news. We sat on the fence by her house and she said, "You know, I'm scared about my dad too." Her eyes were pink and wet. I just sat there and stared at my sneakers and I thought I should hug her but I couldn't. I was frozen.

In the afternoon Orit comes knocking on my door and suggests we go for a walk to Fege, a neighbourhood pretty far from where we live. She threads a token for the payphone on my shoelace for an emergency. Orit always has one because her mother doesn't come home from work until four.

I grab my hoodie and wrap it around my waist and meet Orit in the parking lot.

"You told your mom?" Orit asks.

"She's napping," I say. "Besides, she won't mind." My mom likes Orit. She thinks she's a good influence.

We walk for a long time. Orit has some money so she buys us chocolate milk in plastic bags and we puncture holes in them with our teeth and suck on the plastic, letting the bags hang between our lips. We talk about school and gossip about our teachers and classmates. Halfway to Fege, it starts smelling like the bomb shelter in our building, which is always damp and dusty. We look up and it starts to rain, a cloud bursting over our heads. Everything turns dark, like someone flicked off the light switch. The asphalt is shiny and wet like a giant dead fish and we have to hop over puddles on the sidewalks. The sides of the road start to flow like rivers, full of leaves and plastic bags and candy wrappers. We start laughing, running until we make it to the nearest apartment building and take shelter in the lobby. We sit on the marble floor next to a row

of metal mailboxes and a big fake palm tree and wait for the rain to stop. Inside the lobby it's quiet and cool and even the smallest sound has an echo. Every now and then people come in, shake their umbrellas and let them drip on the floor while they check their mail. They glance at us and then go upstairs to their homes, the echo of their footsteps fading away. Nobody asks us anything. Only one older lady smiles and says in a thick Russian accent, "Guess summer is over, eh?" and Orit says, "Guess so."

A young soldier walks by us without checking the mail. He's wearing a khaki uniform and his gun dangles behind him. There are two lines sewn on his sleeves. Orit follows him with her gaze and once he's gone she says, "Corporal, engineering corps."

Orit knows all the different ranks and forces in the army. She says the Air Force is the best, then the navy and the ones with coloured caps: like paratroopers, who also have red boots to match their caps, and then artillery corps and armoured corps. Orit's entire family is in the Air Force, even her mother who was a secretary in the Air Force during her army service, which is where her parents met. Orit's father is a major and has a profile of 97, which is the highest medical rating and determines your suitability for fighting. My dad only scored 62. He had a weak heart and thick eyeglasses.

My dad once took Orit and me to the movies and later to a café on Hertzl Street, where we sat at a table on the sidewalk and shared hummus and fries and falafel. When he ordered for us he said, "The lovely young ladies would like some Coke, please." He asked our opinions of the movie and talked to us like we were grownups and he was really interested in what we had to say. Afterwards Orit said I was lucky that my dad was around. I only met Orit's dad once when he came back from the army. He was wearing a grey uniform, all decorated with glinting pins on

his chest and some round buttons on his shoulders. He picked Orit up and spun her around and didn't even say hello to me.

Orit is braiding her hair in neat little braids. I find a pen in my pocket and start drawing hearts on my jeans. The marble starts to feel cold on my bum.

"Aren't you cold?" I ask.

"No."

"How come you didn't bring a hoodie?"

"I'm not cold."

"I don't believe you," I say.

"You think I want to suffer?"

"I think you like to show off, like you're tough or something."

Orit rolls her eyes at me but says nothing, just keeps braiding her hair.

A teenage boy with acne on his forehead and a skateboard walks by and looks at us. He lingers by the mailbox and keeps glancing at us. Orit and I smile at each other. I think he's going to talk to us but then he just skips up the stairs to his home.

"You want to know a secret?" Orit says.

I nod.

"Yonatan asked Dalit to be his girlfriend."

I press the pen into my jeans until the tip pokes through the fabric. "When?"

"Friday at the party."

I press harder. I can feel the pen jabbing my skin.

"When are you going to come to parties again?" Orit says.

I shrug.

“You should come next week. Danny is having one at his house. There’s going to be a DJ.”

“I’m not allowed to go to parties. It’s inappropriate,” I say. “You’re supposed to wait a year according to the Torah.”

“A whole year?”

I shrug.

“We miss you,” Orit says. “I miss you.”

I stare at the floor between my legs. Suddenly I have tears in my eyes. They burst out all at once. I pull the hood over my head so Orit won’t see them.

“Are you upset?” she says.

“No. I don’t care.”

“You can tell me if you’re upset.”

“I’m not upset!” I yell.

“Why are you yelling at me?”

“Why don’t you just shut up and leave me alone?”

Orit stands up. “Fine. I’m tired of defending you anyway.”

“Defending me?” I snort.

“Yeah, everyone says you’re being weird since your father died. Even Michal is not acting like this and her father was a hero.”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.” I stand up and push Orit out of the way and run outside. By the time I get to the payphone I am soaked again, my face wet. I take the token off my shoelace and call my mother to ask her to come get me but the phone rings and rings. I sit on the dirty floor of the phone booth. I can’t see through the condensation on the glass or hear

anything through the rain pounding on the booth. I feel like I'm in an aquarium. I wonder if this is what it feels like to be dead. Shut in and all alone. At first my heart beats fast, but then I lean my head against the cool wall and watch the glare of the traffic lights through the steamed-up glass; it's beautiful, how it paints everything green, then orange, then red, then green again. I start to feel quiet and still and a little sleepy. I almost don't want the rain to end. I stay in the booth even after the rain slows down to a drizzle and finally stops. I wipe a window with my sleeve and look out. The street looks different now – new, as if the rain injected fluids into its veins. The sky is the colour of peaches and blood oranges.

Up high, two warplanes fly north and disappear behind trees.