

Purification

by Elisha Porat

translated from the Hebrew by Alan Sacks

I.

Although I knew there was no other route to the mountain, the flight ahead filled me with dread. All the roads were blocked by a heavy snowfall; the only possibility was to travel by air. The officer in charge of our bus was both a very conscientious man and very stubborn. Three times he compelled the driver to make the border crossing, to pick a path between the heaping drifts of snow, but the bus was not designed for travel on snowy roads. It skidded to a stop in a ditch, and only with difficulty was the fuming driver able to prevent it from tumbling into a deep ravine. Even our officer had to surrender at last and ordered the driver to turn back for the approaches to Metulla. A brief order already awaited us at the check-point, directing the officer to lodge us for the night at the guest house of a northern kibbutz. How long were we to wait? Until the weather cleared enough for our little unit to ascend the mountain.

The men listened to the order and broke out in cheers. Their tour of reserve duty definitely was starting out on the right foot. They looked forward to pleasant days at the guest house, warm, quiet days and satisfying meals. Who knew when the weather would take a turn for the better? While the region lay under a low pressure front, a harsh winter settled over the army in Lebanon. Soldiers who had fought that summer in light uniforms among the orchards of pruned cherry trees never dreamed that they would be ravaged by winter on the heights of the mountain.

At the guest house, our hardworking commander split us into groups of two or three according to the number of beds in each room. That was how I met Yehuda Levy, a small Tel Aviv publisher about my age who had returned to service in Lebanon. Or so he presented himself. I said a few words "what luck, I myself have some contact with the book business." By the old uniform he wore, I knew at once that quite some time had passed since he had been called up for active service. I went right to the point and asked if that was so. He said that I was right, he had not been called since the Yom Kippur war. "Is it that obvious?" Yes, I replied, it is. He did not even recognize the new model weapons and was embarrassed by his shameful scores at the target range. The army had left us behind as it went forward, but that was not entirely our fault, he said. The military authorities bore their measure of responsibility as well. That, however, was a long story without a very happy end. "I'll tell it to you some night in the operations room at the mountain."

The room we drew was clean and comfortable, a place you could heat up in a moment. Yehuda Levy spread his gear on his bed. I could see right off that he hadn't any experience with a posting in Lebanon. I had heard recently that the army was making an effort to see that everyone shouldered part of the load; in other words, it was calling into service soldiers long since ruled unfit. As for me, see how lucky a fellow I was; I had hardly started out for Lebanon and what a partner they had yoked to me.

I went to the faucet to fill my canteen. "Just a moment," Yehuda Levy suddenly sprang up.

"Wait, don't drink that." From his knapsack, he drew a water purifier for the tap, an old cloth handkerchief and a tinted glass he had brought from home." Never drink straight from the tap," he said. "The water is filthy. You can't drink it without first putting it through a purifier." I was astonished but, to avoid unnecessary mistakes with him, bowed to his idiosyncratic demand. Meanwhile, the day was growing late and it would be a pity to squander the last minutes of light. "Let's get out for a bit," I pressed him, "we should learn our way around the guest house's paths. Who knows, perhaps our prayers will be heard in heaven, and we might earn a few days rest here." I could not ask for a warmer, more pleasant shelter than this. If only they would leave us here in peace until the snowbanks were cleared. If only they would let us stay until the convoys began moving again on the crumbling mountain roads.

We set out for the gardens and lawns outside. The trees were losing their leaves to winter. Little brooks, crossed by handsome bridges, flowed in all directions. Dry leaves floated in the waters. Yehuda Levy complimented the architects of the guest house, who had spared no effort to wind the walks and lanes through nature's wonders. I asked how business was for a small Tel Aviv publisher in these hard times. What was he printing? Please say he had nothing to do with those anthologies of protest poems. Yehuda Levy smiled, putting my fears at rest. No best selling romances for bored housewives, either; he made his living from publishing text books. In fact, he did no more than one or two books a year. Even that was considered a lot. A highly regarded text book is not forgotten as the years go by. If one took the trouble to keep it up to date with the latest information, and conform its appearance as needed to current styles, it would yield profits for years to come, especially if the subject of the book were carefully chosen. Some years earlier, for example, he had insisted on publishing nothing but computer instruction guides. He was ahead of his time, he boasted, making that decision long before every house had a computer.

We arrived at the dining hall bright with light. The meal the army had provided was plain but you could pay for it on account. The soldiers from our bus, like children overcome with joy, darted between the tables. Everything intrigued them. Heedless of how their hooping disturbed the staff, they gawked at the riches of the kitchen. The men imagined how, at that very moment, they were supposed to be stationed on the lowest level of the great building on the mountain, dug deep beneath the surface of the earth, frozen from cold and crammed onto rough wooden benches. Who could endure any longer the monotonous, unchanging menu of the military mess? And that was not all. If you needed to relieve yourself, you had to go outside into the freezing snow and squeeze into a stinking shack of a latrine. Then an awful stench smothered you, as though you had spent a solid week in the privy.

Yehuda Levy asked me what it meant to have some contact with the book business.

"Newspapers," I replied, "I write light occasional pieces for the newspaper. Now and then, I do a tiresome article about life on the line. Nothing serious." I said what I said to bring us a little closer, to help dispel some of the initial strangeness. I wanted to help us get acquainted but wasn't looking for conversation more profound than that. But he wanted to know a little more, so I stammered something about my talk with a newspaper editor. Shortly before I left for Lebanon, he called and asked me to rush back some articles drawn from my service. "Don't work too hard on them," he advised me, "just write what you see around you. Sort of little picture post cards, what they used to call illustrated cards."

In a moment of weakness, I granted his request. I already regretted it. What with the ceaseless military pandemonium, the perpetual drone of voices and ever-present distractions, I could not

find a single minute of quiet for myself. How would I find free time to write him my impressions? Yehuda Levy was sorry that he had not brought along any samples of his text books. I said that I was sorry that I did not have an illustrated post card in my pocket. Actually, the post cards were destined for the back pages of the newspaper, the weekend literary supplement that only a handful of readers would ever reach. Of what interest could they be to a small Tel Aviv publisher of computer manuals? We sat awhile in the dining room, making small talk over hot drinks. Fatigue weighed more and more heavily on me. I had been on the move without pause since early in the morning. The call-up, the ascent to the Lebanese border, the vain attempts by our commander to break through the barriers of snow, all these had exhausted me and worn me down. I was ready to put it all aside, to retire to our toasty room and burrow into my bed.

But Yehuda Levy wanted me to join those watching television. The shows everyone loved were just starting and the television room was well heated. We could sip on a glass from the bar, sink into an easy chair and slip into a deep, pleasant sleep. No worry of the day to come would pluck at our hearts, no fear of helicopters would furrow our brows, for the weatherman had done us a favor with a forecast of worse weather yet. Heavy rain along the coastal plain, fierce winds in the desert, snow to continue falling without letup in the high mountains. Such a dear weatherman he was; he could not imagine how sweetly his miserable forecast fell on our tired ears.

II.

For ten long years, since the end of the Yom Kippur war, Yehuda Levy was not summoned to active reserve duty. I saw how clumsy he was operating the new weapons and immediately understood everything. Fumbling so under my gaze humiliated him. "OK," he said, "but I was a sharp soldier in my time. Yes, there were years when just a few men in the battalion could compete with me in mounting a machine gun." I did not need to prod him into speaking. He was eager to talk, and even offered answers to questions I had not broached.

He still bore an injury to his ears from a terrible battle in the sands of Sinai. He had suffered a severe loss of hearing, which the doctors diagnosed as partial deafness. He was unable to forget that damned battle or his bad luck. He remembered and could even hear the din raised by the battalion as it hastily deployed. He saw long columns of infantry advancing for a counter-attack. The Egyptians caught by surprise across the Canal braced for battle on the hills of sand. He remembered his platoon marching at the rear of the company column, their faltering steps, the clatter of their guns, the men wheezing from the strain. Endless sandhills flowed around them. Coarse grains of sand penetrated every crease of his clothing, filled his shoes, coated his lips and sifted through his hair. He cursed the sand and the night, the Egyptians and their surprise war, and prayed to return home safely through the treacherous sea of sand.

It was the sand he cursed that saved his life, one of those ironies of war. The Egyptian shell that had been chasing him all night missed him by a matter of feet. "An Egyptian shell was chasing you? It was after you all night?" Yes, Yehuda Levy stubbornly insisted, the Egyptian shell had personally locked on to him from the start of the battle, aiming straight for him. It eventually fell right under him and exploded under his legs, but only after plowing into the sand. Yehuda Levy remembered the funnel of dark sand gushing like a geyser beside him. By the flashes that lit the dark, he could see everything as clear as day. He remembered the jolt that shook his body as the nemesis shell struck. Then he fell into a daze from which he awoke only on the floor of a

helicopter.

Years passed. Then, joined by the newspapers, the whole country began baying for the goldbricks to be rounded up for service. He saw his chance. After years in which he begged the authorities, pleaded with them by every means he knew, they finally called on him. Was it worth his time to detail how they shuttled him off for one battery of tests after another? To tick off on his fingers, one by one, the medical committees to which he was summoned? Not one day of delay could be blamed on him. He had volunteered for duty despite his injury, even agreed to sign any necessary liability release. But still the military authorities refused. The reasons they gave were farcical: incapacitating wounds, compensation for the injuries, medical treatments that never ended. In a maddening tone, they told him again and again to review his situation. He would do well to bring some references with him. Just between us and the wall, so the others waiting in line won't hear, who needs you, anyway? Look at yourself, half deaf, middle-aged and completely out of things. What were you doing all those years when your buddies, those good men who survived the blood bath that night in the sand, left year after year for active duty on the borders?

By then, he had given up all hope that his application would be accepted. He reconciled himself to the idea that the military chapter of his life, musty as it was, had come to a close, and even was relieved that they had turned him away; his rejection, after all, would save him a great deal of trouble. It was only in the bleak hours of the night, when memories of the bloody night in the desert haunted his thoughts, that he yearned for some misty vision of military life.

Once again, he saw the skin of sand cleft beneath his feet, felt in every fiber of his body the helicopter floor rocking and shaking, eyed the metal ceiling above him studded with thousands of screws.

Yehuda Levy, too, was frightened by the coming helicopter flight to the top of the mountain. For an instant, we were partners in a shared sensation. We both were afraid to fly. The feral terror that seized us was illogical and utterly groundless. The little publisher and I, each for his own reasons, trembled at the memory of helicopters. That was why he had shuddered yesterday on the bus when our can-do commander had announced that we might continue to the mountain by helicopter. Seared by the images of his evacuation that night in the sand, he wanted to rise from his seat, approach our dedicated officer and confidentially ask to remain at a camp in the rear. It was not that he refused to fly. Nothing that even sounded like the word refusal crossed his lips. He knew he had no right to ask anything for himself after a ten year absence, he really wanted to fly, but he simply could not. He was careful to speak in the regulation terms he had mastered long ago in basic training.

Our energetic officer was very sympathetic. He treated everyone with respect. After hearing out the request, he said, "Yehuda, I understand, I really do. If I had anyone to take your place, I would gladly drop you at the rear command post. But you can see for yourself how short-handed we are. Everyone is essential on the mountain. We have to relieve an entire outfit going home and reinforce a number of positions. Besides, why have you come to me so late? Why didn't you ask me this back at the mobilization point?"

In our little room at the guest house, Yehuda Levy told me that he had cringed before our young officer, reluctant to burden him with the story of his past. To be blunt, he had been ashamed to

make an issue of his phobia. The man already had his hands full. Yehuda wouldn't think of taking his valuable time with the story of that bloody night in Sinai.

"You did the right thing," I said, "but don't be shy when we get to the mountain. Run straight to the commander and tell him everything."

"You understand," Yehuda Levy said, "I was simply overcome with shame. The ten years that had gone by suddenly seemed like a hundred. Back then, that officer was just a boy. I've heard how he addresses the reserve soldiers under him. 'Uncle, would you mind getting in line? Uncle, would it bother you if I inspected your rifle? Tell me, uncle, have you ever fired an American gun?'"

We were free in our rooms until the afternoon. The weather had calmed. Here, in the valley, the rain had stopped and a pale sun even peeked through the clouds. Reports from the mountain were that the snow there actually was getting thicker. That was good. The helicopter flights would be delayed a little longer. The peaks of the mountains were still cloaked in a heavy mist. The pilots would have trouble coming down in the little landing zones buried under snow. From time to time, however, the clouds would part, the fog lift and the deep blue of a clear sky spread over the mountain. These were golden opportunities, not to be missed, for otherwise who knew when the men up there could be brought down? They were all short-tempered by now. There had been ugly outbursts, disputes erupting over nonsense, quarrels kindled over nothing. An effort had to be made to move our unit up on the double.

I helped Yehuda Levy pack his gear. We would look back fondly on this little room, longing to return to the cozy, tranquil guest house in the valley. I pulled from my pocket a package of ear plugs that had been distributed to us at the target range to muffle the rat-a-tat-tat of the shooting. Some of the men had advised me to plug my ears as protection against the thunderous roar of a helicopter flight. I suggested that Yehuda Levy try the plugs, but he curled his mouth into a taunt smile, pointed to his ears and said, "I don't need any plugs. My ears were sealed a long time ago. Have you already forgotten?"

III.

From the moment we landed on the mountain, Yehuda Levy became a changed man. Possessed by a strange anxiety, he began rambling nervously through the rooms, from the quartermaster's magazine to the clubroom, from the armory to the lecture hall. He found commotion and lines of men wherever he went. With everyone in a rush, the corridors were jammed.

"Here's your chance, see the doctor," I urged him, "don't put it off till tomorrow. You don't look good."

He waved off my advice with a contemptuous flick of his hand over one shoulder. "What does he know of my fear of flying?"

"Tell him," I said, "tell him everything you told me down in the valley."

"Go away, that won't help," Yehuda Levy answered. "I know army doctors."

As though in a fever, he skipped ceaselessly up and down the stairs of the building. A chill draft

blew through the seething corridors. Every few minutes, he approached one of the kerosene heaters, hugged it and gripped the flue. Warm again, he then resumed his antics. His army boots thumping on the floor, he strode to a wild rhythm only he could hear. His steps echoed through the empty halls, clacking like restless typewriter keys. He would not listen to my advice. I asked him to change out of his ancient uniform and put on the new one he had packed, but he refused and stayed in what he had worn ten years before. Run straight from the helicopter to the infirmary to speak with the doctor, I recommended, but he demurred. He needed some time to recover from the shock of the flight, he said. Whatever I offered, he rejected.

He sipped now and then from a canteen of water that hung from his belt. "It's important to drink," he said. He had filtered the water through the special handkerchief stuffed in his pocket. "This is not the desert, but the risk of dehydration still exists." I had watched in our room at the guest house while he filtered the water through his purifier. I was amazed by what I saw. "The water here is filthy," he had said. "Anything but filtered water is unsafe to drink."

I thought he might be suffering from an infection for which, I suggested, he drink only boiled water. He declined with an air of annoyance. "It's not a matter of boiling," he said, "not at all. The water in the pipes is polluted. I need to purify it." He would not drink as others do. He swirled the filtered water from cheek to cheek and gargled it at length like medicine, as though he could not rely on his handkerchief filter and was subjecting the water to an additional test for purity. "We may not be in the sands of Sinai, but we can still dry out here."

"How high is the mountain?" he asked me. "About a mile and a quarter," I replied, "according to the map notations and adding the height of the building."

"I need air," he said, taking deep breaths. "I haven't had any air since we landed on the mountain." He opened the top button of his shirt. It was an absurd gesture, since he wore a tight sweater over the shirt and had buttoned a jacket over both. "It feels like my air has been cut off," he said. "It feels like I'm choking all the time."

"Perhaps you are sensitive to the thin mountain air. I've never felt that way. I've never had a problem breathing high up on a mountain. We're getting old," I said, "don't forget that we're all getting old. Besides that, ten years have passed, and you have changed in the meantime."

He grew angry at me. "What are you saying? I trekked the Sinai ranges. I climbed to the top of the mountains. I felt like a youngster there. The awe-inspiring sunsets thrilled me no less than the young men of the unit."

"Get to a doctor, Yehuda. You don't look good."

Yehuda Levy turned his back to me with the same irritated, disdainful wave of his hand. He continued his compulsive pacing. It was clear to me that he was a stricken man in need of immediate attention. Of that, however, I could not convince him. With the giant, bobbing strides of a camel, he crisscrossed the stark, stone corridors, bounded down the broad stairway and then climbed back up, panting hard, sweating, his face hot and flushed. "There's no air here, no clean water. Even the faucets are contaminated."

He went down to the huge kitchen in the basement and came back aghast. The kitchen floor was completely covered with greasy dirt. The tables hadn't been cleaned in months.

"Maybe I should go up to the roof. The air there is icy pure. I'll be able to breathe easy there, and test the water in the big plastic trough." And up he went.

I shouted after him that the air on the roof was as cold as ice. When the weather was like this, I warned, no one went outside. I wanted to go after him and bring him back, but I had already been ordered to the operations room, where a briefing for the replacements had begun. We would soon receive our assignments, and I could not chase Yehuda Levy as he galloped up the stairs. I called

the road into Lebanon. Streams of soldiers flowed along the road and among the little shops. I felt as if a depressing strain had been cut out of my life. Whether I used this brief respite to contemplate the passing days or to pass judgment on my conduct, the matter was wholly in my own hands; no one would interfere. I could rise from my plastic seat and proclaim throughout the valley bathed in warm, glowing light that my time had come and gone. What I had seen on the mountain, in the high, thin air, I saw only so I could appreciate the depth of the abyss on whose edge I stood.

I calmly stepped to the counter, calmly ordered a cheese sandwich and a soft drink and, with absolute calm, permitted myself a change of mind, ordering instead a cup of strong coffee. That's that, I sighed with satisfaction, I've carried out my assignment. I've taken care of my small part. What else remained for me to do? The grim war seemed far away, although I was surrounded by its signs and sat only a few miles from the border crossing. Then every passing helicopter reminded of it, every ambulance dashing on the road showed me that I had exempted myself too soon from the real world outside. The war had not ended and surely would continue for many days to come. Suddenly, I looked off into the distance, catching sight of flocks of birds circling over fish ponds radiant with patches of light. I indulged myself in a leisurely study of the enticing curves of Mt. Hermon soaring before me like a rainbow-tinted wall.

I took out of my pocket the ball-point pen that I carried in my wallet and drew a well-worn notebook from my pack. Now, when I felt at ease, I could finally fulfill my obligation to my friend the editor. I had promised to write illustrated postcards for his publication. Snapshots from the scenery of mountainous Lebanon, from the human landscape passing before me on its way to the border crossing. Perhaps now I could allow myself free reign.

I would present him and his readers a palette from the panorama of humanity in Kiryat-Shmona. For that, I would benefit from improving my vantage point, moving my seat from the little tavern to the old city or the snack stand in the central bus station. It was there that a river of men returning from their positions, starved for sleep, plastered with mud, wrapped from head to toe in heavy jackets, would stream before me. The words rolling off their tongues would ring in my ears with all their robust vitality. The names of far-off villages would flow from their lips in raging eddies of speech. With their help, I could be borne from my poor seat by the stand and fly after them to thickets clumped on mountain slopes, to sheer-cut cliffs and unseen springs.

Yes, I had carried out the assignment handed me. I had escorted Yehuda Levy, the small publisher from Tel Aviv, to the military hospital. They had sent me back, quickly, without unnecessary questions. You've done your job? Fine, don't hang around here, get back to your outfit. The doctor on the mountain had given instructions to send him down at once. Yehuda Levy's blood pressure was dangerously high and his wild pulse had to be watched. He needed a reliable attendant, the doctor insisted. The orderlies, who remembered how I had helped to move him, gave me the job of keeping him company on the next helicopter leaving for the valley. He could not stay on the mountain. I did not object. I knew that a replacement would be found for me in the operations room. After all, who said I was bound to the operations officer? A sick comrade needed me more. If they ordered me down, I would not waver despite my fear of flying. If I had to carry him to the hospital, nor would I flinch from that. And if ordered at the hospital to stay by his bed, so I would stay. In this way, my days of reserve service would quickly pass. I would fill my nights with frightful flights and trips that sapped my strength. I would be too exhausted for boredom, too long for home or to mourn the fleeting days.

A strange order awaited me at the hospital. I was not to hurry back to the mountain, for the same reason that no one was able to leave. The few landings the loaded helicopters made were touch and go. I was better off remaining where I was. What that odd order meant was an unexpected, unscheduled leave. Far from home and my unit, I would be alone with my deeds. It seemed to me for some moments that I could see in that order the hand of my friend the editor. It was as though he had taken action from afar to shepherd me to the picture post cards I had promised to write.

As I sat at the table by the snack stand, ideas began to take shape in my mind. With what should I start? How should I write the first of the cards? How could I impress upon my readers that many, many others would follow? And how could I pique their curiosity?

Had I not taken pity on Yehuda Levy's privacy, I would have started with him. Here was a soldier who had not been called to duty for ten years; his country goes to war, and he feels a sense of obligation, perhaps even a yearning for his comrades of old. Despite the hurdles the army places in his path, he succeeds and is posted to the station atop the mountain. There, however, he falls prey to a mysterious illness brought on by the high altitude and possibly other unknown causes. He is evacuated to a hospital for a full set of tests. During the emergency flight on the helicopter, I had managed to look over his papers, which I was not authorized to see. From that stolen glance, I realized, much to my surprise, that the publisher from Tel Aviv had been admitted to a hospital in the past.

For what had he been hospitalized after the Yom Kippur war? Was there any truth to his story of the shell that pursued him all night long? Had the shell really landed in the sand between his feet as the battalion deployed for its ill-fated counter-attack? Had he actually suffered a loss of hearing there? Was it true that he had been half-deaf ever since?

I did not want to write all this in the first card. The truth, however, was that a strange feeling of depression had dogged me, too, at the top of the mountain. There was something to Yehuda Levy's fanciful suspicions. I too had felt crushed beneath the thin, crystalline air. I too had sensed the palpable presence of something hostile homing in, lying in wait for me on the top of the mountain, beyond the landing zone bounded by mounds of plowed snow. I too had seen as we landed the furious rotor wash blowing knapsacks and jackets down the slope. I too had felt, for an instant, the urge to sprint after them, to run through the trenches of snow and tumble to the bottom of the valley. It was as if I, like he, had to flee the mountain before the enemy in ambush struck me down as well. Oh, how the orderlies had made my secret wish come true when they saddled me with the responsibility to keep Yehuda Levy company during the emergency flight on the first helicopter out.

I found it difficult to decide what to write in my first picture post card. Choosing among the possibilities that kept popping into my mind was vexing. I'll get smart, I thought, and make things easy on myself. I'll phone the editor and shift the burden of decision to his shoulders. We'll see if he can offer any advice from his office way back in Tel Aviv. Should I start with descriptions of the scenery? Or perhaps with the Katyusha firings striking terror in the valley's drowsy lap? Maybe I should tag behind the bomb squads as they examined the splintered debris? Or, out of respect for my friend the editor, should I weave all these strands into the heart-warming story of a soldier who returns to the line after an absence of ten years?

But what does our fickle fate desire? Why does it bring down the Katyusha rockets on us precisely at the moment when our man, Yehuda Levy, is crossing the border? I protected him so far as I could, buttoned him up, zipped his jacket to the chin, swathed him in his combat harness and pulled a helmet over his head; but for all my efforts, he froze to his seat in a trance. Everything that had settled deep within him in the ten years since that wretched night assault in Sinai now burst from its grave, thrusting him back into those days he wished only to forget.

V.

Whoever it is who makes the world go around, who presents a man with the surprising opportunities of life, arranged for me to meet Yehuda Levy once again. It was on the sidewalk in Tel Aviv, as I made my way to the newspaper's editorial offices, that I bumped into him. I had an appointment with my friend the editor, the one who some months before had talked me into supplying his paper with the picture post cards from Lebanon. I was running late and had quickened my pace. I had already collected enough demerits with the editor and saw no need to add to the total. A short-cut took me into the narrow streets sloping along Nahal Ayalon, where I walked between open auto garages, crowded stalls of locksmiths and run-down printing shops. With his back to the street, he stood at the entrance to one of the print shops. I almost missed him but he recognized me and turned with a smile.

He hadn't changed a bit since that day I stayed with him at the hospital. On the contrary, the summer light made him seem younger and straighter. He had shed the look of winter and without his heavy army jacket and wool cap, even seemed lean and lithe. There was a healthy look to his face. He was obviously pleased by our unexpected meeting and invited me to his office up the street. I hesitated. I didn't want to make things worse with the editor, who had already given me a scolding. I couldn't forget that he had treated me very generously, assuring that the cards I wrote were handsomely printed. Even when I took longer than I should have, and some of the editorial staff voiced their doubts about continuing the series, he had stood by me. "If the cards are dull," he told his staff, "that is merely a sign that things in Lebanon are dull, and that is a good omen." For all this, I felt indebted to him and did not want to disappoint him again. Yehuda Levy saw my consternation and suggested that I call the editor from his office. That's a good idea, I thought, and agreed.

As we walked from the print shop to his publishing business, I asked about his time at the hospital. We had not seen each other since then. We had met by luck and no less by chance gone our separate ways. If our gung-ho officer had not paired us in the room at the kibbutz guest house in the north, our paths in life would never have crossed.

The doctors ordered another set of tests, recommended a complete change in the way he lived and insisted on regular check-ups, he said. But their fears proved unfounded, for his blood pressure returned to normal and his breathing steadied by itself. Even his heart, which the doctors suspected had been harmed by his single day's stay on the mountain, was found healthy. His life resumed its old flow, undisturbed by any illness from last year's frigid winter.

I asked if he had resolved the matter of his return to army service. He had given up on that, but without a twinge of pain or any sense of defeat. One could not come back after ten years as though nothing had happened. He had noticed that even the army was not the same. And don't think for a minute that the country had remained the same. Nor was the nation the one he had

known before the war; it too had changed.

"How is your fear of flying? Have you been in the air?" They hadn't prepared a warm welcome for me, I joked, as they had in his honor. There had been no festive barrage of Katyushas when I crossed back over the border. "Leave me alone," Yehuda Levy begged, "no more. I've had enough of memories."

In the little building where he conducted his book publishing business, printers, binders and graphic artists were hard at work. The plant hummed with activity. I phoned the editor, who was still waiting for me. He dressed me down, of course, reminding me of every meeting I had canceled and every promise I had forgotten to keep. Every excuse I offered instantly failed, every dodge wilted under the lash of his ridicule. We decided that if I came by, I could drop in at the editorial offices. He intended in any event to remain at his desk until late that night. The conversation left a bad taste in my mouth. I felt that my double-talk had been as transparent and absurd as it was useless. I vowed that one day I would quit my childish games of evasion even if I could not find a more honest way to argue my points.

As he showed me around his office, Yehuda Levy explained how he did his business. It was still just a handful of books, and still limited to computer guides. He saw a bright future in computers. Whoever stuck to printing computer manuals would assure his income. "What about the soul," I asked. "Don't you print any books just to satisfy yourself?" He dismissed my question with that flick of the hand I knew from the mountain. In all his years, he had never written a worthwhile word, with the possible exception of the little diary he had kept during his commitment at the institution. I raised an eyebrow in surprise. What institution? What commitment? "Excuse me," he said, "I thought you had read everything in my medical file on the flight to the hospital. I was groggy but I saw what I saw. Didn't you read my papers? Didn't you take advantage of the opportunity?"

"I'll answer you in the same language," I said. "Maybe I saw and maybe I didn't. But I don't remember reading any documents on that wobbling helicopter. I was in a panic as much as you."

"Really?" Yehuda Levy was astonished. "And I thought you were different, a hero."

"Hardly," I replied. "Besides, I was busy the whole flight writing my post cards for the newspaper. I didn't have time for anything someone else had written." He looked skeptical but did not contest anything I had said.

He put a pot on for tea. I asked if he still was careful to purify water as he had at the mountain. Once again, he fixed me with a bewildered look. "Of course," he said. "The water here in Tel Aviv is filthier than the water there, and the pipes smell terrible, too. There, at least, I could step out on the frozen roof, grab a handful of pure snow, melt it and cool it again in my canteen. Here, the water can really scare you. All the roofs in the area are polluted and the water troughs are splitting from rust."

I wondered if he still used handkerchiefs, replacing one with another, to filter the water. Was he still plagued by those severe, mysterious bouts of nervousness? Did he climb and descend the emergency stairs of the office building time and again with that loping camel's gait? Did he thump in those rough-heeled army boots from wall to wall, corner to corner, spinning around the operations table in wide circles yet making sure to avoid the scattered chairs?

Suddenly, I understood what he had not said. I understood what could instill such habits of aimless wandering in a man. I could guess where a man would grow accustomed to such vigorous pacing on tiled floors, where he would devote himself to such pointless rounds about the yard.

When I turned my eyes to the window opened towards the east, to the highways straddling the Ayalon ravine, I realized that if I could link his strict filtering practices to the discipline of that determined tread of his, I would surely know where he had been. Was it after the Yom Kippur war, after that awful night attack and the maneuver that sank deep beneath the sand?

Yehuda Levy set the teacups before us. We could have gone to the deserted snack bar at the print shop down the street, but he preferred to serve us tea alone in his office. I felt the same way. It was nicer here, where our conversation could evolve without distraction. No one would gape at his strange system of purification or giggle at the odd way he sipped from his cup. He could reveal whatever he wished to disclose in our first meeting and whatever he feared I would discover for myself.

He told me how he had feared the long hours of the night shift, the interminable tours of guard duty in freezing sentry posts. What would happen if no one was able to talk with him? That was why he was happy that we had met. Nor was I sorry to have made his acquaintance. "After all, we are in kindred professions. You are a small publisher and I...what am I? The author of incidental pieces for the newspaper. Still, I was somewhat disappointed by your computer manuals."

Yehuda Levy rose from his seat, searched the shelves of a cabinet and pulled out a bound folder of reinforced cardboard. "It's been a long time since I've read these diaries. I've never given them to anyone to read, but you earned the right to see them on the way to the hospital. I won't soon forget how good you were to me. Take them, read them, maybe you'll find the answers to some of the questions that are bothering you."

I couldn't refuse. I took the file from him but regretted at once that I had accepted his invitation. I was sorry I had come up to drink tea in his office. There are some things that shouldn't be read and shouldn't be known. We could have sat downstairs, in the snack bar at the print shop down the street, and I would never have become obliged to read the folder of reinforced cardboard.