

Healthy Start

by Etgar Keret

Translated by Miriam Shlesinger

Every night, after she had finally left him, he'd fall asleep in a different spot: on the sofa, in an armchair in the living room, on the mat on the balcony like some homeless bum. Every morning, he made a point of going out for breakfast. Even prisoners get a daily walk in the yard, don't they? At the café they always gave him a table set for two, and sat him across from an empty chair. Always. Even when the waiter specifically asked him whether he was alone. Other people would be sitting there in twos or threes, laughing or tasting each other's food, or fighting over the bill, while Avichai sat by himself eating his Healthy Start—orange juice, muesli with honey, decaf double espresso with warm low-fat milk on the side. Of course it would have been nicer if someone had sat down across from him and laughed with him, if there had been someone to argue with over the bill and he'd have to struggle, to hand the money to the waitress saying, "Don't take it from him! Mickey, stop. Just stop! This one's on me." But he didn't really have anyone to do that with, and breakfast alone was ten times better than staying home.

Avichai spent a lot of time watching the people at the other tables. He'd eavesdrop on conversations, read the sports supplement or inspect the ups and downs of the Israeli shares on Wall Street with an air of detached concern. Sometimes someone would come over and ask for a section of the paper he'd finished reading, and he would nod and try to smile. Once, when a sexy young mother with a baby in a stroller walked over to him, he even said to her, as he gave up the front page with the banner headline about a gang rape in the suburbs: "What a crazy world we're bringing our children into." He thought it sounded like the kind of statement that brings people closer together, pointing as it did to their common fate, but the sexy mom just glared at him with a half-angry stare and took the Healthy Living supplement too without asking.

Then one Thursday a fat, sweaty guy walked into the café and smiled at him. Avichai was surprised. The last person who'd given him a smile was Maayan, five months before she left him, and hers had been utterly sarcastic, whereas the fat guy's smile was soft, almost apologetic. The fat guy gestured unmistakably that he'd like to sit down, and Avichai nodded back almost without stopping to think. The fat guy took a seat.

"Meir," he said, "I'm really sorry I'm late. I know we said ten but I had a nightmare morning with the kid."

It crossed Avichai's mind that maybe he ought to tell the fat guy he wasn't Meir, but he found himself checking his watch instead, and saying, "What's ten minutes? Forget it."

Then neither of them spoke for a second, and Avichai asked if the kid was okay. And the fat guy said she was, it was just that she'd started a new kindergarten, and every time he took her there she had a hard time letting him go.

"But never mind," he stopped short. "You've got enough on your plate without my problems. Let's get down to business."

Avichai took a deep breath and waited.

“Look,” the fat guy said. “Five hundred is too high. Give it to me for four hundred. Know what? Four hundred and ten even and I’m good for six hundred pieces.”

“Four hundred and eighty,” Avichai said. “Four hundred and eighty. And that’s only if you’re good for a thousand.”

“You gotta understand,” the fat guy said. “The market’s in the shitter, what with the recession and all. Just last night on the news they showed people eating out of garbage pails. If you keep pushing, I’ll have to sell high. You’re pricing me right out of the market.”

“Don’t worry,” Avichai told him. “For every three people eating out of garbage pails, there’s someone driving a Mercedes.”

For some reason, this sentence made the fat guy laugh out loud. “They told me you were tough,” he muttered with a smile.

“I’m just like you,” Avichai protested. “Just trying to keep body and soul together.”

The fat guy wiped his sweaty palm on his shirt, then held it out. “Four hundred and sixty,” he said. “Four hundred and sixty and I take a thousand.” When he saw Avichai wasn’t reacting, he added: “Four hundred and sixty, a thousand pieces, and I owe you a favor. And you know better than anyone, Meir, that in our business favors are worth more than money.”

This last sentence was all Avichai needed to take the outstretched hand and shake it. For the first time in his life, someone owed him a favor. Someone who thought his name was Meir, but still. And when they’d finished eating, as they argued over who would pick up the tab, a warm feeling spread through Avichai’s stomach. He beat the fat guy to it by a tenth of a second and shoved the crumpled bill into the waitress’s hand.

From that day on it happened almost routinely. Avichai would take a seat, place his order, and keep a lookout for any new person who came into the café, and if that person started searching the tables with an expectant look, Avichai would quickly wave and invite him or her to take a seat.

“I don’t want to have to take you to court,” a bald guy with thick eyebrows told him.

“Me neither,” Avichai conceded. “It’s always better to settle things amicably.”

“Just remember I don’t do night shifts,” a silicone-lipped bleach blonde announced.

“Just who do you think you are? Do you really expect everyone else to do night shifts, except you?” Avichai grumbled back.

“Gabi asked me to tell you he’s sorry,” said a guy with rotting teeth and bad breath.

“If he’s really sorry,” Avichai countered, “tell him to come and tell me himself. No middlemen!”

“In your e-mail you sounded taller,” a skinny redhead complained.

“In your e-mail you sounded less picky,” he snapped.

And somehow everything worked out in the end. He and baldy settled, the silicone lips agreed to ask her sister to babysit so she could do one night shift a week, the bad breath promised Gabi would phone, and the redhead and Avichai agreed they weren't quite right for each other. Sometimes they picked up the tab, sometimes he did. With the redhead, they went dutch. It was all so fascinating that if a whole morning went by when nobody took a seat across from him at the table, Avichai's heart began to sink. Luckily, this didn't happen too often.

Almost a month had gone by since the sweaty fat guy when a pockmarked man walked in. Despite the pocked face and the fact that he looked at least ten years older than Avichai, he was a good-looking guy with loads of charisma. The first thing he said as he sat down was: “I was sure you wouldn't show.”

“But we agreed to meet,” Avichai answered.

“Yes,” said the pockmarked guy with a sad smile, “except that after the way I yelled at you on the phone, I was afraid you'd chicken out.”

“So here I am,” Avichai said, almost teasingly.

“I'm sorry I yelled at you on the phone,” the guy apologized. “Really, I just lost it. But I meant every word I said—you got that? Now I'm asking you to stop seeing her.”

“But I love her,” Avichai said in a stifled voice.

“Sometimes you can love something and you still have to give it up,” the pockmarked guy said. “Listen to someone a little older than you. Sometimes you have to give it up.”

“Sorry,” Avichai said, “but I can't.”

“Yes you can,” the guy shot back. “You can and you will. There's no other way. We both love her, but I happen to be her husband, and I'm not about to let you break up my family. Got that?”

Avichai shook his head. “You have no idea what my life has been like this past year,” he told the husband. “Hell. Not even hell, just one great big stale chunk of nothing. And when you've been living with nothing for so long and suddenly something turns up, you can't just tell it to go away. You understand me, don't you? I know you understand me.”

The husband bit his lower lip. “If you see her one more time,” he said, “I'll kill you. I'm not kidding either. I'll kill you.”

“So kill me.” Avichai shrugged. “You don't scare me. We're all going to die in the end.”

The husband bent across the table and socked Avichai in the jaw. It was the first time in his life that anyone had hit him so hard, and Avichai felt a hot wave of pain surge up somewhere in the middle of his face and spread in every direction. Seconds later, he found himself on the floor, with the husband standing over him.

“I’ll take her away from here,” the husband kept shouting, as he went on kicking Avichai in the stomach and ribs. “I’ll take her far away, to another country, and you won’t know where she is. You’ll never see her again, you got that, you rotten piece of shit?”

Two waiters jumped on the husband and managed somehow to pull him away from Avichai. One of them yelled to the barman to call the police. With his cheek still glued to the coolness of the floor, Avichai watched the husband run out of the café. One of the waiters bent over and asked him whether he was okay. Avichai tried to answer.

“Do you want me to call an ambulance?” the waiter asked.

Avichai whispered that he didn’t.

“Are you sure?” the waiter insisted. “Your lip is bleeding.”

Avichai nodded slowly and shut his eyes. He tried as hard as he could to imagine himself with that woman. The one he’d never see again. He tried, and for a moment he almost succeeded. His whole body ached. He felt alive.