

**Motti knows that war is coming.** Israel is only nineteen years old—the same age as Motti’s brave older brother, Gideon—and the tiny country is surrounded by enemies. Motti wishes he could join the Israeli army like Gideon and be a hero. But when his best friend’s family flees the country and his brother goes off to fight, Motti realizes this war isn’t a game.

Hope comes to Motti in unexpected forms. In the kind Ethiopian priest who lives nearby. In his grouchy neighbor, old Mrs. Friedburg. In the young Germans who come to offer help. In his father’s childhood friend, a Jordanian man. Even in a scrappy stray cat that roams the bombed city without fear. Motti knows his older brother is a hero—but through the six days of the war that will decide Israel’s fate, he discovers other heroes in surprising places. He may even be a hero himself.

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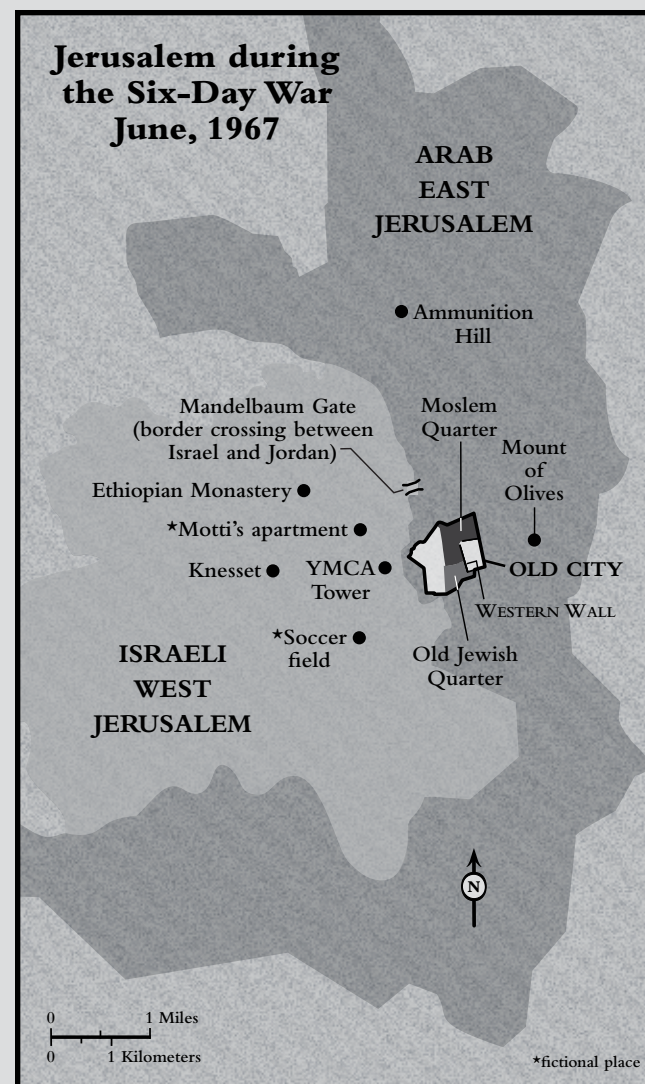
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## Before

We think we know the future. And we do, to some degree. Not what kind of job we'll have when we're grown. But tomorrow. Or next week. We know what's coming. School. Friends. Chores. The usual. We really believe that what happened yesterday is probably going to happen again today.

Except sometimes we're completely wrong.

In 1967, the world thought the Middle East was fine. The American president was briefed: there won't be another war for at least four years. In my country, Israel, the Prime minister and his cabinet said the same: the situation looked okay. Nothing threatened our existence.

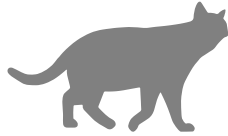


No one predicted what the month ahead would have in store for all of us.

Even the smartest people in the world can be wrong.



## Part I The Wait



## Chapter One **Independence Day**

I hate ceremonies. My dad knows this, of course. I catch him glancing over at me. He's got that look: half-annoyed, half-worried. I can't help squirming in my seat and jiggling my feet. Everyone sitting on our bench vibrates slightly. My dad places a heavy hand on my leg. I stop jiggling. I don't have a great record where formal events are concerned.

The president of Israel, Zalman Shazar, drones on.

My older brother, Gideon, is up on the stage, five people over from the president at the lectern. Gideon doesn't look bored. Like all the other Independence Babies—Israelis born on the same

day as our country's independence day—he wears his olive green class-A uniform. There are two hundred of them up on the stands. Today is their nineteenth birthday. Israel's nineteenth birthday too.

"Our country is strong," our president says. "Our country is growing . . ." Blah, blah, blah. I tune out the rest. Gideon looks fascinated.

"Abba," I hiss.

My dad looks over, annoyed.

"I gotta piss."

His lips press together in a tight line. But I know he can't scold about my language now. Which is why I took the opportunity to say "piss" instead of "pee." It's the small things in life, you know?

"Go, Motti, but be back in five minutes," he says sternly.

I grin. As I start to slide past, he slips a one-lira bill into my hands.

"Come back with a drink," he says with a hint of a smile. "I'm melting,"

I tuck the crumpled bill into my pocket. I'm out of there before he changes his mind. A few

people glare at me as I squeeze through the narrow rows of benches.

“Young man, the president of Israel is speaking. Have some respect,” an older woman hisses at me. She has a thick Polish accent.

“Excuse me, madam,” I say. “I have to use the facilities.”

Her face softens for a moment. The older ones are always easy if you stay polite. Plus, I have this face. The Europeans always melt for it. I don’t know why. I have pale eyes, freckles, curly brown hair. I recently turned twelve, and with my bar mitzvah less than a year away, I wish I looked less like a cute kid and more like a teenager. No one takes me seriously. The lady reaches for the purse she’s holding in her lap. I hear the rustle of cellophane. I quickly slide by before she can offer me a moth-eaten candy. The old ladies all have sticky old lozenges they try to foist on unsuspecting children.

I manage to get away from the rows of benches. There are thousands of people here to see the annual celebration. It rotates every

year between Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Jerusalem. It’s always a bit tense when it’s Jerusalem’s turn, since Jordan controls half of it. Israel has West Jerusalem, and Jordan has East Jerusalem with the Old City, the Temple Mount, and the Western Wall. No Jews allowed. Some newspaper editorials argue that we shouldn’t have our independence celebration in Jerusalem at all, since it’s so close to one of the countries that tried to keep us from being a country. They claim it’s confrontational. Other commentators argue that we’re allowed to do what we want to do in our half of Jerusalem. The old joke goes that in Israel, if you ask two people what they think, you’ll get three opinions.

Usually there’s a military parade showing off our tanks, jeeps, and hundreds of marching soldiers with guns. It’s great. Last year there were rows and rows of rumbling tanks, everyone cheering and hollering, waving blue and white flags. I yelled so much, I lost my voice for two days. This year, there’s hardly anything. It’s boring. No tanks. No armored vehicles. Students from Hebrew University have shown up with

cardboard cutouts of tanks. They hold them up, as if asking, *Is this the best we can do?*

My dad tells me it's a compromise: we have our celebration in Jerusalem, but we don't aggravate the Jordanians or their lethal army. *I* am aggravated instead.

I've made my way out of the seated crowd. There's a round of applause. The president must have finished his speech. But it's not over. Now Prime minister Eshkol rises. A pot-bellied man with thick glasses and thinning hair, the prime minister shuffles to the microphone. He rustles the papers of his speech and then begins to speak in his thick Russian accent.

Standing at the rear of the seated crowds, I wave at Gideon up on the stands. For a second, I think he's seen me, but then he turns to look at Eshkol. My brother looks tough and grown-up. I'm used to that, though. Gideon was the captain of our Scout troop when he was in high school. He got the highest grades in his high school class. There's nothing my brother doesn't excel at if he wants to. When he finishes his military service, he plans to study engineering

at the Technion, the best science and technology university in Israel.

I look for my dad in the crowd. He's turned in his seat, glaring right at me. I quickly turn and hurry away.

"... there are no serious threats to our existence in the next decade," Prime minister Eshkol pronounces. Everyone claps.

I slip away until I can't make out the words, only an amplified murmur. The kiosks with their smell of newsprint, cardamom, and baked bread are all closed for the holiday. But I find a man who's set up a small stand selling soda and candy. I eye the row of candies at the front, but I don't have enough for a soda *and* candy. My father will expect change.

"One Coca-Cola," I say.

Until last year, we couldn't buy Coca-Colas. The League of Arab States threatened to boycott them if they sold any Cokes in Israel. Not just Coca-Cola. There are a whole bunch of products from cars to candy that aren't available in Israel. But Coca-Cola decided last year that they would let Israelis buy their soda. The

Arab League promptly put Coke on their list of boycotted products, forbidding its sale in their countries. So I always make a point to buy some Coke. To make it up to the Coca-Cola company.

The man reaches down and pulls out a cold soda from the cooler at his feet.

“Motti!”

I turn.

“Yossi!”

Yossi is a dark-haired, dark-eyed, wiry kid from my school. We’re also in the same Scout troop. He smacks me on the back. I pretend to punch him, and he dodges.

“Get out of here, you hooligans,” the man says, waving us away.

We crack up. I throw an arm around Yossi’s neck and he rests his arm around my waist. We find a shady spot under a fig tree. I take a big sip. Yossi stares at the bottle.

“Want some?” I hand the glass soda bottle to him.

He drinks deeply, then belches and hands it back.

“Hey,” I say indignantly. “You drank half of it!”

He ignores this. “Let’s see if there’s anyone at the stadium.”

The stadium is a scrubby, open field with soccer goals that we made by stacking white rocks in two columns on either side of a rough rectangle. Our soccer stadium.

We head over there. There are three boys kicking a tattered ball. We quickly join in, dribbling and kicking and scoring against each other. It’s a hot, sunny day. We pass the soda among the five of us, and the bottle is soon empty, lying on its side by some rocks. My white button-down shirt is streaked with dirt, my nice shoes scuffed. My team is down by two points but I’m not giving up. I have the ball for a throw-in, looking for an open player.

“Motti.” A shadow falls over me.

It’s Gideon. My older brother has the same light brown curls I do, but his eyes are a deep dark brown, fringed with heavy lashes. Girls always giggle when he passes.

“It’s over?” I ask. “Already?”



“It was short.” He eyes the empty soda bottle a few feet away. “Dad’s looking for you. And he’s thirsty.”

“*Ach!*” I slap my forehead. “I meant to leave some for him.”

Gideon gives me a look.

“See you later,” I tell my team and hurl the ball deep toward the opposing team’s goal.

Yossi scrambles after it, hollering, “See you tomorrow!”

I follow Gideon down the narrow, cobbled lanes, through our city of high walls and hidden courtyards, passing building after building of pale stone. By law, all buildings in Jerusalem are built out of the same local white rock. It’s been this way for three thousand years, since the time of King David.

Gideon’s walking fast, and I trot to keep up. We cross through one of the many fields that separate the various neighborhoods. The field is full of knee-high grasses and wild flowers. Off to our right is the grammar school we both attended and where our six-year-old brother, Beni, goes now. I brush too close to a prickly

thistle and it scratches my leg, drawing a line of blood.

“Keep up, squirt,” Gideon says. Of course, he’s not the least bit winded, though we’re almost jogging. Gideon has always been very fit and strong. In the first months of his military training, his unit would go on long hikes to “get to know their equipment.” These would be 40-kilometer-long daily hikes in full gear. Sometimes Gideon would finish up his hike, then turn around to join the stragglers. He would jog alongside them for the last few kilometers, encouraging them on when they were tired and miserable. They must have found him as annoying as I do.

We’re back in our neighborhood now. We skirt around a reeking bag of trash. Two cats slink away as we pass. They’re skinny little strays. One of them is all white. I aim a kick as it dashes in front of me, but it twists away and I miss. Stray cats are good at dodging kicks.

A heavy hand falls on my shoulder and Gideon squeezes, his fingers digging painfully into my collarbone. I yelp.

“Don’t go out of your way to hurt small creatures,” he says, his face right in mine. I knock his hand off me.

“What’s it to you?” I demand. I push my face right back in his. My fists bunch at my sides. “They’re just stupid stray cats. Everybody kicks them.” I wasn’t even really thinking about the cat, or wanting to hurt it. It was just in front of me and I kicked.

“Everyone else does it?” he mocks. “Is that why you do it? Or because they can’t kick you back?”

I hate the rising feeling of shame in my chest. Gideon can always make me feel stupid and incompetent. He can also read me like a book. His face eases as he sees my feelings of guilt. The hand that comes back to rest on my shoulder turns soft and warm.

“Motti,” he says, “it’s too easy to hurt things. You need to have a good reason to hurt something.”

“Like what?” I ask, shaking off his hand again.

“If it’s going to hurt you first.” He pauses.

“Then you strike and strike hard. You knock it into the wall and kill it.” I picture it, the cat, neck snapped, falling to the cobbled lane. It turns my stomach. “Otherwise, leave it alone.”

We walk the rest of the way home in silence. He ruffles my hair and I dodge, elbowing him in the ribs.

By the time we reach our building, the setting sun casts long shadows over the eucalyptus tree in the front courtyard. The smell of dinner meets us at the door of our apartment.

My mom is a phenomenal cook. Everything that comes out of our cramped kitchen is bound to taste delicious. Schnitzel. Chicken soup. Noodles in butter with parsley. Tomato and cucumber salads. Chocolate cake. Not everyone has such a mother. After a few dinners at my friends’ houses and some camping trips with Scouts, I finally realized how lucky I was. This past year, I was constantly hungry and my mother always seemed to have something wonderful coming out of the small oven. Like everyone else, we have to be careful with our money, but there is always enough food to eat.