

OCTOBER 13, 2014

# TELL ME A STORY WITH A HAPPY ENDING

BY SAYED KASHUA AND ETGAR KERET

*El Uja, Palestine; May, 2009.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY PAOLO PELLEGRIN / MAGNUM

On July 19th, just days after Israel launched a ground invasion of Gaza, the Israeli-Palestinian writer Sayed Kashua published a piece in the *Guardian*, titled “Why I Have to Leave Israel



(<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/20/sayed-kashua-why-i-have-to-leave-israel>.)” Kashua, who was born in the predominantly Arab town of Tira, spent most of his life in Jerusalem. He devoted his weekly column in *Haaretz* to telling “the Palestinian story,” and he is the creator of “Arab Labor,” a popular sitcom that is a sendup of problems experienced by Israel’s Arab citizens.

Kashua, along with his wife and three children, had been planning to spend his sabbatical year in Illinois, but in light of the renewed conflict in Gaza and the anti-Arab violence erupting in Israel the trip had come to feel like a more permanent expatriation. “Twenty-five years of writing in Hebrew, and nothing has changed,” he wrote in the *Guardian*. “Last week I gave up. Last week something inside of me broke. When Jewish youth parade through the city shouting ‘Death to the Arabs,’ and attack Arabs only because they are Arabs, I understood that I had lost my little war.”

Now living in Champaign and working as a Hebrew and writing instructor at the University of Illinois, Kashua recently exchanged a series of letters about life as an expat with his friend the Jewish-Israeli writer and filmmaker Etgar Keret. Like Kashua, Keret has been unafraid to speak out against the Israeli government (during the conflict in Gaza, he wrote about Israeli society’s intolerance of criticism (<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/israels-other-war>)); his tragicomic, surrealist short stories often deal obliquely with the pain and contradictions of modern Israeli life. The two writers have known each other for more than a decade, and in their correspondence they help one another to think through their despair over Israel’s condition. The first part of their exchange is published below; read part II here (<http://www.newyorker.com/uncategorized/tell-story-happy-ending-exchange-etgar-keret-sayed-kashua-part-ii>).

*Their letters are translated, from the Hebrew, by Sondra Silverston.*

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*September 13, 2014*

Hi, Etgar,

How are you, Shira and Lev?

*Sayed Kashua*

It's so weird to be writing to you, you know. Just this week, I was thinking about you. I talked about you in my Hebrew class, and, in the end, I brought the students one of your short stories, "Hope They Die." It took us an hour to read half of it. They're nice, my students, but their Hebrew leaves a lot to be desired. But that wasn't why I thought about you. I thought about you because of the winter that's starting to show itself here. I mean, it's not that winter has started, maybe it's just the beginning of autumn, but it already feels like the coldest days of a Jerusalem winter. It's cold in central Illinois, and almost everyone who meets me and knows that I just arrived feels obligated to warn me about the cruel winter that's in store for us here.



This week, we had to buy warm clothes. As you know, we arrived here in summer or, maybe more accurately, we ran away to this place in summer, and except for a few short-sleeve shirts and a couple of pairs of pants we took almost nothing from home, and winter is almost here and the kids have nothing warm to wear.

"Go to T.J. Maxx," some very helpful new acquaintances, who are making our acclimatization easier, told us. "They have good things there, and they're pretty cheap."

"Don't buy in the mall," the parents of an Israeli kid my son met in elementary school told us. "There's a huge outlet half an hour away by car, terrific clothes at great prices."

We listened to our new friends' advice and bought the kids clothes from the outlets, until it came to coats. "On coats, we don't compromise," I told my wife. "Not in central Illinois, not for the kind of winter they promised we'd have."

And you know, it's because of you that I'm not being stingy about coats. You probably don't remember, but when we once shared a taxi from Leipzig to Berlin, maybe fifteen years ago, you told me a story about your father, and one sentence is engraved in my mind: "He survived because he took a coat."

“On coats, we don’t compromise,” I told my wife. “We have to buy the best, the most expensive.”

In any case, we’re in Champaign, Illinois. There’s not a lot to do here: there’s a university and endless cornfields, and except for that, I don’t know about much. Would you believe that a few months have passed and I haven’t gone out for a beer even once? I don’t know if they even have any decent bars here. I’ll have to find one really soon. Meantime, we’ve been busy getting the house organized, finding schools for the kids, finding my way around the university, and figuring out where to buy tahini and cucumbers.

Somehow, the kids have adjusted faster than I thought, and even though the language is new and completely foreign to them, and despite the weather and the food, and even though they had to leave their friends, they seem happy on the whole. I know because they hurry me to start the car in the morning and leave the house early, because they don’t want to be late for school. Somehow, my wife has settled in here, even though I was afraid she’d go crazy with boredom because she’s taking a vacation from school and work for the first time in twenty years.

And I, who was so happy that I left, that I took my family far away from that terrible place called Israel, that I removed them from the smell of gunpowder and blood, I sometimes feel that I’m the most miserable of all of us. I’m afraid to stay here, and I’m so afraid of the day I have to go back home, to Jerusalem, to Israel, to Palestine. Leaving was traumatic. I felt like a refugee running for his life, and the decision to leave quickly was made even before the war with Gaza began. On the day the Palestinian boy was burned to death in Jerusalem, I realized that I couldn’t let my kids leave the house anymore. That day, I called the travel agent and asked her to get us out as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, it took a few days, and that damn war, another damn war, had already started, and the racism that I’d seen taking off around the second intifada, at the end of 2000, was reaching terrifying heights. I was so afraid, and I felt really persecuted. You know, I was at the zenith of my success—with a film scheduled to come out this summer and a new series being shot during those first days of the war—and all of a sudden I felt I’d been turned into the enemy. All of a sudden, every runny-nosed journalist thinks they can vent their anger on me, all of a sudden I’m afraid of the water girl on the set, Etgar. All of a sudden, even the production assistant I never met thinks he can stand in front of me when I come in for the day’s shooting and tell me, with a clear sense of superiority, “We have to bomb the hell out of them, one by one.” And I’m afraid. I’m afraid of my kindhearted next-door neighbors, because they have a look in their eyes that I never saw before the war; I’m afraid of the barman who’s been pouring me beers for more than twenty years.

My wife always said that I was a coward with a paranoid-personality disorder, said that the situation was frightening but that I was exaggerating. But, I swear to you, Etgar, I saw the way that my closest Jewish friends started looking at me differently. Sometimes, they

tried not to look me in the eye, and sometimes their looks were accusing, condescending, hating.

You know, I never pictured myself wanting to be a teacher, and when I taught in Israel I really hated it. But I'm so afraid of going back there that I'm thrilled to prepare and check lessons before every class here, hoping they'll want me to stay another year and maybe another year after that. I'd been asked so often whether I was considering leaving Israel, but I never thought before about living somewhere else. I always rejected the possibility proudly: "What are you talking about? I have a war to fight here." And, you know, this summer I realized that I'd lost. This summer, the last vestiges of hope in my heart were crushed. This summer, I realized that I couldn't lie to my kids anymore and tell them that one day they'd have equal rights in a democratic country. This summer, I realized that the Arab citizens of the country would never have a better future. Just the opposite—it would be worse, the ghettos they live in would only be more crowded, more violent, and more indigent as the years passed. I realized this summer that I could no longer promise my kids a better future.

On the other hand, I'm so afraid to stay here; what's here for me if I can't write? And what will I do without Hebrew, the only language I can write in? At first, I thought I'd learn a new language, that I'd drop Hebrew for English, and, believe it or not, the first book I bought here was yours. It hurts so much to realize that, in my search for new language, I don't even consider Arabic, my mother tongue, a worthy option.

Here I am, a Palestinian Arab who only knows how to write in Hebrew, stuck in central Illinois.

Even though I know that you and your wife had some bad days because you dared to voice a different view, opposing violence and the war machine, I'm still writing to you, maybe because I want you to give me a little hope. You can lie, if you feel like. Please, Etgar, tell me a short story with a happy ending, please.

Best

Sayed

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*September 13, 2014*

Hi, Sayed,

*Etgar Keret*

I was really happy to get a letter from you, and really sad when I read it. I hate to say it, but I know the Illinois town you're living in pretty well. A few years ago, when Lev was still in kindergarten, I was invited to lecture at the University of Illinois and went there with my family for a few weeks. When we came back to Israel, each of us weighed a few kilos more, and we were all thankful that the airlines charge money for overweight suitcases and not for overweight people. That's how it is when you live in a country where, instead of celebrating Yom Kippur and Holocaust Memorial Day, they celebrate Donut Day. (There really is such a thing, I swear.)



Even now, Lev says that Rome and New York are fascinating cities but no place in the world comes close to Urbana, Illinois, and all because of the bowling alley and video-game arcade he remembers so fondly. (The thing that impressed him the most was the enormous number of soda-vending machines.) So I'm not surprised that your kids adjusted so easily—you have to limit their pancake and donut intake, or else it'll end badly. When it comes to nutrition, American cuisine is worse than ISIS—and it's easy for me to understand why you haven't really found your place there. You asked me for an optimistic story with a happy end, so here goes, I'll give it a try:

2015 was a historic year in the Middle East, all because of a surprising, brilliant idea that an Arab-Israeli expatriate had. One evening, the writer was sitting on his front porch in Urbana, Illinois, looking at the endless cornfields that spread all the way to the horizon. Seeing that enormous expanse, he couldn't escape the thought that maybe the troubles in the place he came from stemmed from the fact that there simply wasn't enough room for everybody. "If I could just pack all those fields in my suitcase," he said to himself, "fold them very, very neatly, very, very small, I could fly back to Israel with them. I'd pass through customs on the green line for people who have nothing to declare, because what would I really have? It wasn't as if I'd be bringing some subversive ideology in my suitcase, or anything else that might interest a customs inspector. All I would have would be some huge cornfields that I'd folded up very, very small, and when I got home I'd open the suitcase, take them out, and *shazam!* All of a sudden, there would be enough land for everyone, the Palestinians and the Israelis, and even some left over for a giant amusement park where both peoples would take all the knowledge and technology that they apply to developing weapons and use it to build the most amazing roller-coaster in the world instead."

He was very excited when he went into the house and tried to share his thrilling insight with his wife, but she refused to get excited. “Forget it,” she said in a cold voice. “It’ll never work.” The writer admitted that he still had to figure out a number of logistic issues, like convincing the farmers in Illinois to give him all those cornfields, not to mention finding a method of folding that would allow him to squeeze all those fields into one large suitcase. “But,” he rebuked his wife, “those minor problems are no reason to abandon an idea that might bring peace to our region.”

“That’s not the problem, dummy,” his wife said. “Even if you managed to squeeze all the land in the world into that battered suitcase of yours, you’d never succeed in bringing peace to the region. On one hand, the radical ultra-Orthodox would say that God promised all those cornfields to them, and on the other the messianic racists would say that those cornfields were their birthright. There’s no getting away from it, husband,” she said, shrugging. “We were born in a place where, even though a lot of people want to live side by side in peace, there are still enough people on both sides who don’t want to, and they’ll never let it happen.”

That night, the writer had a strange dream, and in it there was an endless cornfield, and from that cornfield missiles were being launched and shot down by antimissile missiles as jet fighters flew past, dropping bombs from the heavens. The field went up in flames and the writer found himself wondering, still in his dream, who the hell was fighting whom? Because there were no people at all in the dream, just missiles, bombs, and burning corncobs.

The next morning, the writer drank his disgusting American coffee quietly, without even saying good morning to his wife—he was highly insulted that she had called him a dummy the day before—and after dropping the kids off at school and kindergarten he sat down at his computer and tried to write a story. Something sad, with a lot of self-pity, about an honest, good man whose life and wife had both been cruel to him for no reason. But, as he labored over the story, a brilliant idea popped into his head, a hundred times better than the previous one, about how to solve the problems of the Middle East. If the issue wasn't territory but people, all they had to do was update the "two-state solution" to a three-state solution, so that the Palestinians would live in the first, the Israelis in the second, and the radical fundamentalists, the racists, and all those people who just got their kicks fighting would live in the third. His wife was less scornful of this plan than she had been of his folding-up-the-cornfields idea, not to mention that Barack Obama, whom the writer bumped into in a diner at a gas station on the outskirts of Urbana Illinois, simply loved it.

In less than a decade, there were three countries side by side in that tiny corner of the Middle East: the State of Israel, the State of Palestine, and the Republic of Force-Is-the-Only-Language-They-Understand, a place where civil war raged constantly and which arms dealers and news broadcasters supported. The writer (who, in the story, is quite modest) politely refused the Nobel Peace Prize, packed his suitcase, and went back with his family to his old house in Israel. And each time Barack Obama came to the Middle East in another one of his unsuccessful efforts to bring peace to the Republic of Force-Is-the-Only-Language-They-Understand, he'd stop in for a visit to the writer who had managed, with his own hands, to bring peace to his people. They'd sit together in silence on the writer's balcony, which overlooked a terraced valley, and eat heartily of the ears of corn resting on the plates in front of them.

That's the story. I'm not sure it's really a story, and I don't know if it's really optimistic, but it's the best I could do. Take care of yourself, and, whatever happens, don't cut corners when it comes to coats. A coat is an important thing.

Yours,

Etgar

P.S.: Be careful. A common occurrence among Israelis who immigrate to the U.S. is that they begin speaking Yiddish, and, in the case of Arabs, it might sound comical!

*Photograph of Sayed Kashua by Amit Shabi / laif / Redux.*

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Etgar Keret's latest collection to appear in English is "Suddenly a Knock at the Door." His story "Creative Writing" ([http://www.newyorker.com/fiction/features/2012/01/02/120102fi\\_fiction\\_keret](http://www.newyorker.com/fiction/features/2012/01/02/120102fi_fiction_keret)) appeared in the magazine.

Sayed Kashua is the author of, among other books, "Dancing Arabs," "Let it Be Morning," and "Second Person Singular."

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