**The New House**

"Get out of here, kids! Now!" Dad yelled impatiently.

Ben and Gali, my younger brother and sister, quickly came to sit by my side so I could help them put their shoes on. Ben was eight years old, but small for his age, introverted and quiet. Gali was almost two, a bouncy, mischievous toddler, her delicate curls making her look especially sweet. And I was eleven. Almost. A full-grown adult, not a trace of a child in me. The big sister to the core. I was the one who put Gali to bed every night, heated their food when they got back from their after-school activities, washed the dishes and took care of them till our parents got back from work. I was the one who would rescue them from the deadly sibling quarrels which went on every single day.

I put my own shoes on as fast as I could so I could help Ben tie his shoelaces and help Gali put on her toddler shoes. I was afraid to upset Dad. It's strange, but I seemed to be the only one who was afraid of him. Ben pulled his shoes on slowly and Gali, blissfully innocent, kept on babbling her baby talk. When we were ready, I grabbed their hands and pulled them out to the stairwell, which smelled like whitewash.

We had finally moved to the new house. We'd waited three years for its construction to be completed, while living in a rental apartment in the meantime. That old apartment was full of fights and tension. Mom and Dad could hardly breathe as they waited for the construction to be completed. Whenever they spoke of the new house, their eyes shone. I had hoped that when we moved, everything would be different. They made the new house sound like the home of their dreams, with its beautiful desert view, parking lot and storage space. A new house with a promise of a new life.

"The new house will be bigger and you'll have more space, and you'll finally have a room of your own," Mom promised. I fantasized about my own little corner, my little room that would protect me from all the noise. I had a feeling it would be better for all of us. Maybe Mom and Dad would even stop fighting. But after the move, the screaming and the shouting didn't stop. Maybe it even got louder. The new house was a mess, full of boxes, and they were anxious to unpack everything and make themselves at home once again. They were always sending us kids outside, even though "outside" was just a paved pathway near a new lawn where someone had planted large boulders so kids couldn't play ball and disturb the neighbors' peace and quiet.

We didn't meet many other children outside. It was nothing like the street we had previously lived on, where there were a bunch of other kids and we spent most of the daylight hours outside because we wanted to. We used to make "bombs" out of balls of mud and fight the kids from the building next door. In between wars, we'd hide out in our secret "camp", which we built on top of the garbage shed. It had been two weeks since the move, and nothing I'd hoped would happen in the new house actually did. Mom and Dad kept on fighting, Ben kept on picking on me, and there was no new friend I could run to. And we were constantly sent outside.

My two younger siblings and I sat down on a sidewalk bench, bored, waiting for the time to go by so we could go home. Ben started throwing pebbles and pestering me, and I starting chasing him so I could beat him up. Gali, left alone on the bench, began to cry. I wish we could move back to the old house, I thought to myself in despair when I returned to comfort Gali. I didn’t mind giving up my own room. The new house was so much worse.

When an hour had finally passed, I felt relieved to announce that we could go back home. Just to make sure, I peeked at my watch again. I didn't want to upset Dad. Everything annoyed him, particularly our presence. Sometimes I'd wonder why they even had us. I'd hear them complaining to their friends again and again during their evening conversations, telling them how hard we made their lives. They thought we couldn't hear, but I could hear everything, and I could understand. I understood that we were a heavy burden on their shoulders, that being our parents was hard, and that we were difficult, disobedient children. We didn't make them happy, like the families I'd seen in American movies. But parents like those couldn't really exist, those parents who love their children and smile at them all the time, who speak to them gently, respectfully. It's only like that in the movies, I consoled myself. It's not real. I'd feel relieved when their friends would agree with them, complaining about their own children. I understood that we were just like everybody else, that this was real life, that children are difficult and parents complain, and that's just the way it is.

We returned to the building and slowly climbed the clean stairs. I liked the smell of the plaster and the fresh paint. It reminded me of the hope I used to have, the hope for something different. And maybe, just maybe, that something different would eventually happen.

We passed the neighbors' doors, finally arriving at our own door on the fourth floor. Hesitantly, I knocked on the heavy brown security door. Dad opened it angrily. "You're back already?! You couldn't have stayed out a little longer?"

We quickly slipped inside before he'd have a chance to send us back out again, hoping he'd just close the door. "It's boring outside. There are no other kids to play with," I mumbled, speaking for my younger siblings, glancing disappointedly at the door which remained wide open.

"Go out for another hour, and don't come back one minute sooner," he roared furiously. "Am I making myself clear?!" When I heard his voice booming down the stairwell, I thought to myself that the neighbors could probably hear it too. It was so embarrassing.

"We don't want to!" I, the firstborn, replied for everyone, gaining confidence from the knowledge that my siblings were standing behind me, expecting me to protect them. It wasn't just me. I was the voice for all of us. "It's boring outside," I added weakly, in attempt to blur my previous rudeness. He wouldn't dare. When the momentary silence flooded the air, I felt I had crossed a red line.