

Crossing a river twice / Yoav Avni  
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A Book synopsis

Translation sample



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### **A book synopsis**

It's a dark, stormy winter. It's raining incessantly, the Yarkon River is overflowing, and in a small investigation agency on Ibn-Gabirol St, Itamar – a high-tech drop-out and a former kayak racer – turns his back on life and everything in it. He feels flooded, drowning in everyday problems, and all he wants is some quiet, preferably of the dry, warm and lonesome sort, only him and his goldfish, Goldihawn. Itamar desperately wants to believe that what you see is what you get, and has never dared to look under the surface. That's where Somebody Else's Problems are.

But then a girl comes into his life. Unfortunately, she's accompanied by a large, control freak, quick to anger criminal, looking for Itamar's boss, who vanished as if the earth has swallowed him up. Or the river. Itamar is swept by a mystery turbulent with a Scottish pensioner, a blurry photo of the Yarkon, cryptozoology, way too many buttons, guys and dolls.

Crossing a River Twice, by Geffen award winner Yoav Avni, is a detective novel like you haven't read before. Clever and sophisticated, fast-paced and thrilling, overflowing with humor and brimming with wit and humanity. In his fifth book Avni offers, in his brilliant style, an Israeli version of one of the myths that haunt human imagination for eons, which is also an urban ode to the Yarkon and all of its occupants.

Yoav Avni was born in Israel in 1969. His first book, a collection of short stories entitled "Those Strange Americans" was published in 1995 by Tamuz Publishing House. Stories were translated into English by the American magazines Zeek and Words without borders. His first novel, "Three Things for a Desert Island" (Shlosha Devarim le'iy Boded) was published in 2006 by Kinneret-Zmora-Bitan Publishing House. The novel describes the journey of an Israeli high-tech salesman to a fictional island located in the Indian Ocean. "Three Things for a Desert Island" became a bestseller in Israel and is considered a cult book among Israeli backpackers. The book was nominated for the 2006 Geffen Award. Avni's second novel "To Be" (Ha-chamishit shel Chong Levi) was published by Kinneret-Zmora-Bitan in 2009 and Won the 2010 Geffen Award. "To Be" is a speculative novel whose action takes place in the summer of 2017 in Israel. His third novel "What if" (Herzl Amar) was published by Kinneret-Zmora-Bitan in 2011. The novel assumes that the Uganda plan suggested by the British to Herzl in 1903 was accepted by the Zionist congress and Israel was established in East Africa. In 2010 Avni translated to Hebrew Charles Kingsley's "The Water Boys". In 2012 He will translate "Watership Down" by Richard Adams. Yoav Avni's writing is influenced by authors like Tom Robbins, Douglas Adams and Kurt Vonnegut.

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# **Crossing a river twice**

By Yoav Avni

Translation sample (CH1-3) - Translated by Tom C. Atkins

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"Thou didst blow with Thy wind, the sea covered them; they sank as lead in the mighty waters." – Song of the Sea, Exodus 15:10.

(Excerpt from the report made by the Government Examination Committee for the events of Pelet1 drill / Epigraph)

## Prologue

The long summer, worn and dusted by civic protests and threats of war, has ended. The grey, dry cloth of an amateurish autumn has wiped over Israel's coastal plain, and a real winter has taken its place. The weathermen could predict an exceptionally rainy season – but nothing more.

On December 21<sup>st</sup>, a turning point of the seasons, a certain dreariness lingered in the air, matching the stormy forecasts and inspiring in many the need to conclude their workweek earlier than usual and hurry to their comfortable cars, heading to the safety of their homes. A wind began blowing, out of nowhere, and at three thirty in the afternoon the Ayalon highway was already more than usually jammed south of Gilot interchange, cars huddled together as if trying to preserve body heat.

With evening approaching, the sun's manner suggested it had all the time in the world, sliding slowly into a quiet, embracing sea. But the end of the shortest day of the year also heralds the night's greatest hour, and along the tense line between the two, another turning point came about.

The few observers from the Tel Aviv port promenade saw the explosion as a distant candle flame, suddenly lit and flickering in the intensifying wind, refusing to settle down even in the face of the rain which began pouring some minutes before. It was, however, a series of subterranean explosions, raising both the Mediterranean's blood pressure and alarm levels in the control room aboard the oil rig "Pelet1".

The Government Examination Committee appointed to investigate the explosion and the events following it will discuss them extensively and will lay the blame on a bubble of methane gas that blossomed from the deep well, shot upwards and set the water ablaze, claiming the life of three of the rig's crew and injuring five others. The committee will even describe in detail the helplessness of the authorities during the expansion of the leak in the first hours after the blast, and the oil stain that, during that long night and with the help of a lively south-eastern wind, turned into a long, thick strip.

The committee will preface its report with a verse from The Song of The Sea, but will then turn directly to dry facts, and nothing more. The report will detail, for example, every step of the aerial evacuation, but will fail to mention that from the perspective of the rescue helicopters the elongated stain and the remains of the disintegrating rig looked exactly thus :(

It will also detail the exact composition of dangerous chemicals spilt into the sea and describe the possible ways to treat the pollution and its effects, in the course of a discussion that will begin in the Ministry of Environmental Protection and eventually spill over to the Ministry of Security. But since all three members of the committee – a retired supreme court judge, a former dean of the faculty of life sciences and a vice-admiral (res.) – resided in penthouses, and there was not one deep-dweller among them, they will not be able to fully understand the influence of the oily wall that has been drawn overnight in the deeps off the Tel Aviv shore.

A viscous, dripping, darkness, tainting fins and smothering gills. A pressing, arresting darkness, straining necks, grinding teeth and catching tails. A darkness to stifle every heart and claim as its own the ancient gifts of evolution, and who knows what besides.

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"It is only natural that all attention following the explosion was given to the Mediterranean.  
The Yarkon River has thus been cast aside for a few days".  
(Excerpt from the report made by the Government Examination Committee for the events of  
Pelet1 drill / analysis of the facts)

Chapter 1  
**Big\Small**

"Big?"  
"Small?"  
"Everything black water"  
"Little more. Back to high water. Clean water"  
"Now bad water. Neck hard. Tail stops."  
"No stop."  
"Everything stops."  
"So other way, quick, away from black water. There."  
"There no water"  
"Yes water. Small water. Smooth water. There. Here."  
"Big?"  
"Small?"  
"Strange water."  
"Yes. Before salty, now sweet."  
"Which water better?"  
"For us any water good"  
"But not black water."  
"Not black water."  
"Hungry. In black water only black fish."  
"Find food. Here narrow water. Low water. Stay down."  
"Big?"  
"Small?"  
"New water. Protects?"  
"Always protects. Protects since when inside egg."

## Chapter 2 **Itamar Goren**

Even though he didn't plan on ever writing another song, he was thinking, while signaling left and carefully pressing the brake pedal, that nothing will truly rhyme with "Outsider".

While waiting for the long traffic light leading from Rokach Avenue to Ibn Gabirol St., the junction's occupants wouldn't keep to their motorized four (by four) walls, and the other drivers around him made fleeting eye contact with their counterparts. He kept looking ahead, not glancing left nor right, with a mixture of calmness and stubbornness. Something in him – perhaps his symmetrical features, perhaps his brown eyes, reflecting the vestiges of long gone naivety, or the black, thick hair that dominated his physical appearance – one of these unwittingly awakened the notion that he does not readily mix with life, but treats them as water treats oil. As every Outsider, He only rhymed with himself, and by that noticed things that many miss. For instance –

As soon as possible, all these incidental drivers will speed over the bridge arching across the Yarkon River, completely missing its wonders, stretching out to the sea. They will flow away, loose particles in the stream, not noticing, among others, the little private investigation agency, hidden at the end of a row of shops to their right. Heading to the next traffic light, to be judged to red damnation or green salvation, in an almost hopeless effort to obtain the same things Itamar, for his own reasons, withdrew from.

The same Itamar was now waiting for the same traffic light – his wipers a metronome, timing the raindrops, his eyes gazing at the windshield and his thoughts wandering to the blank postcard handed to him by the dental hygienist earlier, at the end of his treatment.

When she had turned it over and asked him to write his address on the right, he wondered if she had chosen an especially old fashioned way to hint at her interest in him. He wasn't entirely vain to think that – a number of women in the past had convinced themselves that he was a challenge to rise up to, and others had sensed a deficiency in him, wanting to be filled (each and every one of them, at the end of a relatively short-lived relationship, wondered where exactly did she go wrong).

The postcard: a cardboard rectangle of recycled paper sporting a cross-section of a molar and underneath it, in golden letters, his dentist's motto ("People with healthy teeth laugh more"). Apparently it was meant to be delivered to him only after six more months – a note-to-self to be sent by mail in time for the next treatment, thus encompassing, in hindsight, all of the coming six months and inducing him to an almost unwilling pre-emptive reflection, under the traffic light's red glare.

Like the other endangered species in its genus – the telegram and the letter – the postcard too is tied by paper bonds to time and space, passing between the moments of writing, sending, arriving. It was denied the ever shortening instantaneity of the electronic flash, which makes it so hard for so many people to take a breath. Its other side was almost completely blank – except for the few lines dedicated to the address, a white and inviting surface sprawled, and Itamar wondered whether he should have written something to his future-self there, something for the medium time frame – a promise, some positive reinforcement, a good advice or a warning.

"It's hard to get hold of everyone, and you'd be surprised to know how many still don't use e-mail" the hygienist answered when he asked her about the postcard – she was

new to the clinic, and her predecessor, he remembered, did trust the phone and the art of conversation. "Besides, this way the responsibility is yours," she added. The large buttons on her white coat stared at him with the dead stare of a blind albino. Before the treatment he asked whether she could take it off, and of course had to explain why. Usually the short explanation elicited a short smile, or a follow-up question, but the hygienist only laid, frozen faced, her coat on the chair, its arms around the backrest, as if strangling it, and with surgical efficiency rolled up the sleeves of the black sweater she wore under the coat, and instructed him to open his mouth, in much the same tone she would use to order him to do the opposite. Immediately after the comforting "please rinse" she called out "one moment, please!" towards the silhouette of the ten-fifteen appointment, which was already knocking on the milk glass door, and with a quick pull removed the cloth mask covering much of her made-up face. She returned to her coat, brought the buttoned albino back to life and handed Itamar the postcard.

He was lucky she wasn't interested. When paying he felt her quick, unfamiliar gaze might roll the terrible suction unit at him. His parents, though, would have found a common ground with her, he was thinking now, his gaze following the water divide left by the raindrops, hunted by the car's wipers, on the windshield. They resembled animal tracks, the traffic light bathing them in red, turning them into a bloody trail and adding an element of danger.

He chose two – a big one and a smaller one – and placed bets on which would reach the hood unharmed. But as sometimes happen in life, both did. Yes, he thought, a common ground where responsibility, or lack thereof, will be present everywhere. If they thought he was irresponsible when in high school he chose biology over physics as his major, or when, during his military service, he left the prestigious unit he was assigned to (in fact he was expelled, but he never told them why), or when he dumped the daughter of a real-estate tycoon who owned a hotel chain in eastern Europe, then in the last year they believed he lost all control.

They still didn't understand why he gave up his job as a programmer just when they finally managed to pronounce his company's oh-so-clever name. They supposed the dark (though loving) prediction they felt obligated to thrust upon him had been fulfilled – welfare doesn't grow on trees, after all, and ultimately Itamar had to find a new job, and just as they have repeatedly warned him – it payed less and lacked any future. So while "E.T investigations" was a much easier name to pronounce than "Dreamachine", they did their best to avoid doing just that.

The traffic light yielded, and smiled at his subjects, something green stuck between his teeth. Cars and drivers leapt forward, completely missing, as expected, the view of the river afforded by the bridge – a busy runway, fit both for waterfowl and flying fish. Itamar lingered at the bridge's highest point, opening a window despite the diagonal rain, and looking down and to the right. To his eyes, the boats at the rental station looked like candies, sprinkled over the water and a sweet, misleading taste crept into his being.

The Yarkon had risen considerably following the crash landing the weekend storm performed over the city, and the grass along the banks seemed unnatural, as if treated by an Instagram filter improving tenfold its alertness and vivacity. Tel Aviv is surprised every December anew, he thought, and even without enough holidays and leisure (and he could never have enough of those), beauty seeped everywhere.

He liked winter. Even this exaggerated, stormy winter. In winter he could dress in layers, and what could harm him, covered as he was in his armor of tee-shirt, long, white undershirt, hoodie and a polar fleece jacket? In winter there were more buttons outside,

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true, but on the other hand, staying bottled up at home was guilt-free. Everyone are more reserved, and, amid the loneliness, there was comfort in numbers. In the summer everyone did the same things, ran to get back in shape, drank in never changing places and went to never changing parties and never changing beaches by a never changing sea. And the sea, famously, never changes, and neither do the people. Winter was more individual and subjective. Each to his own eccentricities, to his own moments.

After parking his car by his house – he should do it sooner rather than later, he knew – he walked back to the little investigation agency on the outskirts of Ibn-Gabirol. Tshuva wasn't there, and in fact, he remembered – hadn't responded yet to the text he sent when he arrived at the dental hygienist. He wasn't bothered – he liked being alone in the office. Now, here, in the moment– he tried living at his will and at his leisure: simple days in which the horizon doesn't steal the show. Ambitious and extraordinary life, precisely because he did all he could to avoid extravagance. The world is a fabric made of countless little moments, just like that painting by Monet he noticed immediately upon entering Tshuva's office for the first time, and Itamar religiously collected them. It wasn't the same beaten carpe-diem, but something still that he acquired by great pains and kept for himself, something that could not be expressed in either Latin nor any other language – living or dead. Something as simple as a sieve, separating the personal, private, wheat from the common, vulgar chaff, an everyday sieve that time slowly drains through, precisely because you were having fun. That was the theory, at least.

Inside he turned on the light, smiled to himself and sat down, ready for another day's work, and the start of another week, and nothing more.

### Chapter 3

The storm had lost some of its power, the rain, pouring down in unusual amounts since Thursday, had calmed down, and the sun, which was recently a pale shadow of itself, peeked from behind the clouds, as curious and wary as if it had found that a cold-hearted burglar had invaded its world in its absence, turned it upside-down and left mud and puddles everywhere. Itamar turned the space heater on, pressed his palms together and blew on them before turning to the computer to start working.

He was basically hardworking, a trait that for some reason the quiet investigation agency brought out. Leisure, he had realized for some time, feeds action in the same way that oxygen feeds fire and water feeds life. To work, then: the novice graphic designer that built the agency's website (Tshuva allowed only a miniscule budget for it) was horrified when she found out last weekend that the images she used weren't copyright free, and his mailbox was overflowing with original replacements. Itamar noticed the irony.

So, instead of the binoculars that adorned the homepage, he now placed the handgun she sent, and on the other page – "who are we", "personal investigations", "Financial inquiries" etc. – he placed the other new images – sunglasses, a surveillance camera, the scales of justice, a magnifying glass and a fingerprint. He also found a redundant double space on "Who is a private investigator" and fixed a broken link on "contact us". Pleased with his newly generated wealth of spare time and free will, he surfed the web at his leisure, sideways and onwards. The world was at his fingertips – or so he felt.

The news, he found, was filled with oil.

Itamar read a scathing opinion piece concerning the way the industrial-military complex grease offshore drills' way to approval – tried to imagine the schemes of greedy tycoons, whose businesses dilute their morality, whose time is money and is traded as a commodity, but his train of thought was derailed and grinded to a halt. They no longer elicited the same anger in him as they used to.

Man is in the details, he thought, contentedly, sipping from the coffee he made for himself and feeling its warm, gentle bitterness brush against the hygienist's Fluoride. He excused himself from watching the funerals of the oil rig explosion's victims on the news sites – it was terrible, obviously, but he knew that once he'd seen one, he had seen them all. He also avoided the summary of the environmental organizations' demonstration, paling in comparison with the stain, expanding to harm the shore's flora and fauna, and even the expected coverage of political figures, each throwing the responsibility for last Thursday's nautical disaster into the other's lap. This might be the way of the world, but it didn't have to be his as well.

Looking at the same large picture of the explosion area featured on all the sites, he noticed that from the sky the line of polluting oil and the ruined rig resembled the smiley face's sad counterpart. He wondered whether this was a status-worthy discovery. He hadn't written in a while. He decided not to – many others in his feed have mentioned the explosion. Facebook is the periodic table of people, and ultimately everything is made up of the same elements.

It isn't a good era to be an outsider, with social networks, feeding off of shares and mutual niceties, encompassing everything. He considered deleting his account, but that too was a statement, and Itamar was trying to avoid those. Besides, he used it for work, and maybe he wasn't ready to sever all ties with human society. He wasn't Tarzan.

A reminder flashed on his phone ("Ask about Goldiehawn") sending him to the fishkeeping forum on the Tapuz portal, where he had a quick discussion with "Brilliantfishy" and "Tsachi30". His gold fish showed worrying changes in mood over the last couple of days – eating less, barely moving and tending to keep company with the plastic plant at the side of the round aquarium – and Itamar was seeking advice. The forum had an archaic and anonymous atmosphere that suited his needs. The recommendation was unequivocal – change the aquarium water to mineral water. During winters like this one, Fishy wrote, with precipitation, sediments and fluctuations in the water table's level, the quality of the tap water in the Tel Aviv metropolitan area may deteriorate, and this may harm fish. Tsachi30 also mentioned that depressing oil stain, which may have already penetrated the pipelines.

Not remembering the mineral water's level in his apartment, he added a reminder for 6 PM, to buy a six pack on his way home, and then changed it to five – with all due respect to basic hardworkingness, if Tshuva won't come in today at all, he'll leave earlier. Indeed, an hour saved is an hour earned.

At lunchtime, people of various sizes, speeds and direction were walking outside, as if taking part in an elaborate screen saver mounted on the agency's display window. Most of them seemed busy, or at least busier than him, and although Tshuva was hoping to expand his clientele, Itamar was glad none of them approached the door and made his way in. He had some time on his hands, as a falcon on a hunter's arm, but even a narrow opening could scare it away.

He turned the heater off and texted "finished updating the site. Going out for lunch, want to join?" but the investigator didn't answer to that one either. They frequently ate together, and Itamar had grown accustomed to, and even started to enjoy, their lunches together. Conversation didn't flow, that was true. Tshuva was a man of action and Itamar wasn't, but his employer respected the fresh spring of freedom that bubbled up on every lunch break, and even when talking about work, he did it with a warmth Itamar hadn't encountered on his previous incarnation, at Dreamachine, where lunches were marred by sputters of projects and assignments, and became what he called among himself "Time compiling".

When Tshuva described interrogation techniques, surveillances and misdirections he was wise enough not to mention their darker aspects – clients, filing and deadlines, all while peeling or patiently slicing seasonal fruit with the ivory-handled folding knife he carried in a leather case by his cell-phone.

Tshuva, in his multi-cased belt, reminded Itamar of Bob the Builder (every morning he would watch the JimJam channel, hoping that it is never too late to have a happy childhood, and the English was music to his ears). A simple, good man, which was more than he could say for many others - in other channels and in the life they mirrored.

He checked again – Tshuva hadn't answered. The investigator usually replied to texts. Unlike mails, Whatsapp messages and other signs of the time, he was actually proficient with texts and would usually send a short, quick answer. After Itamar showed him how to use the pre-made texts feature, he showed an absolutely childish devotion to "message received. I'll contact you later". He waited for another short while before leaving and locking the office. There was no point in calling, since Tshuva was in the habit of turning his phone off while on assignment, to prevent an incoming call from needlessly uncovering his location and blowing the surveillance.

So – Falafel or Sushi? Such were the junctions strewn across his path lately. "Mevorach" was busy, with every seat by the few tables taken by knowledgeable insiders, and Itamar decided to take advantage of the relatively dry weather and eat outside, underneath the bridge. All through the weekend storm he closed himself in his house, in

front of the television, in the company of the series, while large clouds were conquering the sky like so many Trojan horses, and now he needed a breath of air.

On his way back, with the hot falafel in one plastic bag and the cold soda can in another, he crossed again the neighboring shops: a beauty salon, a shoe-maker and an insurance agency – small businesses, also passing their days in a sort of enlightened tranquility. A lightning bolt plummeted from the heavens and the investigation agency, still locked, was lit by a bright light that for a fraction of a second penetrated even the hidden, blue depths under Monet's waterlilies, in the replica on the wall over Tshuva's chair.

Itamar descended a terraced rockery, slippery from recent rains, to Bney Dan Street, crossed it to a grove of ficus and oak trees, and following the walking trail adjacent to the one devoted to bikers, reached the lawn stretching to the river bank. This is where he liked eating – level with the Yarkon.

It seems as if winter had opened the taps after a disappointingly barren summer, and a rusty stream ceaselessly cascaded into the river.

The Yarkon, experiencing a growth spurt after the last storm rose in height, or actually depth, and was turning in front of his watching eyes from a creek to a river. There was water everywhere, the air was filled with transparent, fluttering precipitation vapor, and a fleet of solid, severe looking clouds hovered overhead. Onboard, water drops were waiting their turn. Perhaps it was a good thing, Tshuva's absence, he thought. Otherwise he might have tried to extract some sentence out of all of this during a conversation, and then try to explain, having neither a choice nor a chance of success, what he meant.

The bare concrete slab at the ankles of the Bar-Yehuda Bridge served as a chair and tablecloth, and although the echoes were intensified here, and the traffic on Ibn-Gabirol St overhead sounded like a raging mob, the intimidating roof that spread above him gave him a (false) sense of security, like a shelter with a four-sided ventilation.

The scent of falafel rose from the hot pita bread, laden with the exact dosage of salads and condiments – his dosage. The soda can radiated carbonated coolness and the wind whipped the Yarkon into a bitter scented murky shake, the color of chocolate.

After leaving Dreamachine he also quit the rowing club – and now the expected memories floated back. Inside the kayak the paddle became a direct extension of his arm. He loved the swaying of the vessel that could suspend his distrust in the world, a gentle rocking that solid land could never supply. He even wrote a song about it – a mistake that eventually brought the same old shit back to his life, this time reinforced by his lawyers, and also returned some other things to their former state. Again he realized, this time more than ever, that working for Dreamachine is a giant scheme – a pyramid in which modern pharaohs and slaves endlessly sail boats of aluminum-foil to the shores of a sea of lost time everyone must part for themselves. He asked to talk with his team leader, but knowing he would lose him in "pyramid" (or, at the very latest, in "a sea of lost time") he explained he felt exhausted, and knew he was telling the truth.

And it was at the height of a race that he realised that the endless sweeping of the Yarkon's water is just as useless as sweeping assignments through dreamachine was. There has to be another alternative: if he'll just put his hands up – not to the point of surrender, but to the point where effort would not be important and nothing would be measured – he could slip forward and float. This way he could move forward and enjoy the way, or that was the theory. And on his birthday, two days after he started working for Tshuva – he was celebrating its success. By the way, he ended up returning the postcard to the hygienist without giving in to the temptation to add anything but his address. There is a pleasurable power in avoiding an unnecessary action, and having considered it again, he realized now

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that he had nothing of substance to write to his later incarnation, and that was just as well. His life was finally nourished by the passing moment, and not the aroma of the tomorrow. The world around made most people sacrifice their presents on the altar of the future. If he would have decided to finally scribble something on the blank side of the postcard, he would gladly sign off for another six month of quiet, and that's all – nothing more.

He wished he could stay here until the end of the workday and even later. Finish his lunch with a slice of spare time served on a bed of gray clouds coming in from the sky's cauldron, sit and watch, continually, the light breeze becoming visible while blowing through the stars and hearts pattern of the nearby Aushiskin-east Bridge, and descending to touch the rising river.

He wished he could listen to the water's life's work, ceaselessly gushing from nearby drains along the bank. But soon the rain returned, and little drops tattooed the Yarkon's back.

Another lightning bolt slipped from the heavens, chased by a loud, dramatic thunder. The rain picked up and he hurriedly finished, not neglecting to tear what remained of the pita to pieces and throw into the dark water little pieces of white, soft dough that were quickly pulled down never to be seen again.

Itamar got up and turned back to the agency. He glanced at his phone, expecting to find a short text from Tshuva, confirming that business was as usual, nothing more - but the screen remained as blank as a postcard.