

Halibut by Etgar Keret (translated from the Hebrew by Sondra Silverstone 2004)

Ever since I came back to Israel, everything looks different to me. Smelly, sad, dull. Even those lunches with Ari that used to light up my day are a drag now. He's going to marry that Nessia of his, today he's going to surprise me with the news. And I, of course, will be surprised, as if Ofer the blinker hadn't told me the secret four days ago. He loves Nessia, he'll say, and look into my eyes. "This time," he'll say in his deep and very convincing voice, "this time, it's real."

5 We made a date to meet in a fish place on the beach. The economy's in a recession now, and the price of the lunch specials is a joke, anything so people will come. Ari says the recession is good for us, because we — though we may not have realized it yet — are rich. Recession, Ari explains, is tough on the poor; tough isn't the word — it's a killer. But for the rich? It's like frequent-flier bonus points. You can upgrade all the things you used to do without adding a penny. And just like that, the Johnny Walker goes from red label to black, and the four-days-plus-half-board turns into a week, anything so people will come, j-u-s-t c-o-m-e. "I hate
10 this country," I tell him while we're waiting for menus. "I'd split forever if it weren't for the business."

"Get serious." Ari puts his sandaled foot on the chair next to him. "Where else in the world can you find a beach like this?"

"In France," I tell him, "in Thailand, in Brazil, in Australia, in the Caribbean . . ."

"Okay, okay, so go," he interrupts me smugly. "Finish your food, a short espresso, and go!"

"I said," I stress, "that I'd go if it weren't for the business . . ."

15 "The business," Ari bursts out laughing, "the b-u-s-i-n-e-s-s," and waves at the waitress for a menu.

The waitress comes over to tell us what the day's specials are, and Ari gives her the disinterested look of someone in love with another girl. "And for the main dish," she smiles a natural, irresistible smile, "we have slices of red tuna in butter and pepper, halibut on a bed of tofu with a teriyaki sauce, and talking fish with salt and lemon." "I'll take the halibut," Ari says quickly.

"What's talking fish?" I ask. "It's talking fish served raw. It's lightly salted, but not spiced . . ." "And it talks?" I interrupt her. "I
20 highly recommend the halibut," the waitress continues after a nod. "I never tried the talking."

As soon as we started eating, Ari told me about marrying Nessia, or NASDAQ, as he likes to call her. He made up the name when the NASDAQ was still going up and never bothered to update it. I said congratulations, I'm glad. "Me too," Ari slouched a little lower in his seat, "me too. We have a pretty good life, eh? Me and NASDAQ, you . . . alone, temporarily. A bottle of good white wine, air conditioning, the sea."

25 The fish arrived 15 minutes later. The halibut, according to Ari, was terrific. The talking kept quiet. "So it doesn't talk," Ari snapped, "so what? Jeez, don't start making a scene here. I mean it, I don't have the patience." And when he saw me still waving to the waitress, he suggested, "Take a bite — if it's not good, send it back. But at least taste it first." The waitress came over with the same irresistible smile as before.

"The fish . . ." I said to her. "Yes?" she asked, craning her already long neck. "It doesn't talk."

30 The waitress gave a funny little giggle and explained quickly, "The dish is called talking fish as an indication of the kind of fish it is, which, in this case, is the kind that can talk, but the fact that it can talk doesn't mean that it will at any given moment."

"I don't understand . . ." I began.

"What is there to understand?" the waitress condescended to me. "This is a restaurant, not a karaoke club. But if you don't like it, I'd be happy to get you something else . . . You know what? I'd be happy to get you something else anyway . . ."

35 "I don't want something else," I insisted pointlessly. "I want it to talk."

"It's okay," Ari cut in, "you don't have to bring something else. Everything here is great." The waitress flashed a third identical smile and walked away. And Ari said, "Man, I'm getting married. Do you get it? I'm marrying the love of my life. And this time . . ." he dropped in a two-second pause, "this time it's real. This meal, it's a celebration, so come on and fucking eat with me. Without fish and without bellyaching about the country. Just be happy with me, with your good friend, okay?"

40 "I'm happy," I said, "really."

"So eat that ugly fish already," he begged.

"No," I said, and quickly corrected myself, "not yet."

"Now, now," Ari urged, "now, before it gets cold — or send it back. But not like this. Not with the fish on the table and you not talking . . ."

45 "It's not getting cold," I corrected him, "it's raw. And I don't have to be quiet, we can talk . . ."

"Okay," said Ari, "forget it," and jumped angrily to his feet. "I've lost my appetite anyway." He reached for his wallet, but I stopped him.

"Let it be my treat," I said without getting up, "in honor of your wedding."

"Go fuck yourself," Ari hissed, but let go of his wallet. "Why do I even try to explain to you about love. You homo. Did I say
50 homo? I wish — asexual . . ."

"Ari . . ." I tried to interrupt him.

"Even now," Ari shook a finger in the air, "even now I know that later I'll be sorry I said that. But being sorry about it won't make it less true."

55 "Mazel tov," I said, trying to give him one of the waitress's natural smiles. Ari gave me a half—who cares, half-goodbye wave, and left.

"Is everything all right?" the waitress pantomimed from a distance. I nodded. "Your check?" she continued her pantomime. I shook my head. I looked at the sea through the glass — a little murky but very powerful. I looked at the fish — lying on its stomach with its eyes closed, its body rising and falling as if it were breathing. I didn't know if this table was for smokers, but I lit up anyway, one of those satisfying "after" cigarettes. I wasn't really hungry. It was pleasant here, looking out on the sea — too bad there was
60 glass and air conditioning instead of a breeze. I could sit like that looking at the sea for hours. "Take off," the fish whispered to me without opening its eyes, "grab a cab to the airport and hop on the first plane out."

"But I can't just take off like that," I explained in a clear, slow voice. "I have commitments here, business."

The fish shut up again and so did I. Almost a minute later, it added, "Never mind, forget it. I'm depressed."

They didn't put the fish on the bill. They offered me dessert instead, and when I said no, they just subtracted 45 shekels. "I'm sorry
65 . . ." said the waitress, and quickly explained, "I'm sorry you didn't enjoy it." And a second later, she specified, "The fish."

"No, no," I protested, dialing my cell phone for a taxi. "The fish was good. Really, you have a very nice place here."