

# SECOND CHANCE

My Life in Things



RUTH ROSENGARTEN





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# Nature

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The lighter is chunky. Within its cuboid, glassy body, it contains a tiny marine world. A sprinkling of pale sand with the glint of mica; a whooshing of seagrass; the nubble and opalescence of shells; a bright dollop of coral and—magically—a diminutive sea horse, perfectly suspended.

With its bronze duck head, its extravagantly implausible realism and its faint petrol odour, the lighter arrests time.

I love this object and I cannot remember a time in which it did not exist. It stands on a coffee table, just as it always did in the past; it glows amidst a small pile of books and several other objects, arranged in that casual combination of randomness and purpose that defines the contemporary, domestic still life. I am captivated by the simulacral world the lighter contains, a world in which nature is embalmed. But it is hard for me to tell if my captivation is current or if it is an entrenched remnant of childhood still lodged in me like a splinter.

The allure of the lighter resides in its combination of transparency, realism and miniaturisation. It is a fascination redoubled by the quality of a world arrested, preserved, as if in a snapshot. These are characteristics that the lighter shares with other transparent objects that both encapsulate and contain. I am thinking especially of snow globes and paperweights. In such objects, you might see—whittled and scaled down—a world preserved. As with snow globes and paper weights, the separate items inside the lighter are as untouchable as the moments captured in a photograph. Yet the lighter itself exists in order to be touched: without touch, it is not a lighter.

Snow globes and paperweights also exist in order to be touched.

A glass paperweight invites turning—we want to feel its weight and heft—while enlisting our amazement at the techniques of intricate filigree and *millefiori* wrought from brightly coloured glass canes;



molten crystal worked into extraordinary formations. The writer Colette collected paperweights, and after her, Truman Capote, who met Colette through Jean Cocteau. With the snow globe, there is a different kind of touch, the potential of animation through the agency to the viewer—the handler—a little like the activation of a ballerina, mobilised as soon as you open a musical jewellery box. When you shake a globe, all at once, the tiny, enshrined world is filled with a flurry of white, a spectacle of bluster and flux. But that brief resuscitation only throws the globe's state of de-animation—of stilled life—into sharper relief. The snowflakes settle, returning the objects in the globe to the condition of the photograph, a thing of sedentary focus, *nature morte*.

In his introduction to Walter Benjamin's *A Berlin Childhood around 1900* (2006), a book unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime, in which he brings to life the urban world of his childhood, Paul Szondi recounts how, as a child, Benjamin loved snow globes, a detail of his childhood as previously narrated by Theodor Adorno. Szondi sees these globes as reliquaries, sheltering and preserving something from the past: a scene, a moment coming to life, then dying down. He links those flashlit moments to the very structure of *A Berlin Childhood around 1900*, in which small scene-fragments accrue. These snapshots illuminate childhood, and with it, that hope in the past to which even the dead remain subject. And with the notion of past hope, the reader is presented with that most poignant of all conflations of projection and retrospection, premonition and knowledge.

But in that world of vitric arrest, time stands still, as if to shield those who view it from the inevitability of future decay. The sense of comfort produced by a miniature world retrieved from childhood—call it nostalgia—is infused simultaneously with sweetness and sorrow. That's of course no news to anyone. And sometimes, that sorrow stands for another, older sorrow. In *Citizen Kane*, the word *Rosebud*—an inscription on a child's sled fed to flames—is a signifier that gets transposed to another, later-acquired object, a snow-globe that Charles Foster Kane keeps, after destroying his wife's bedroom.

My table lighter must date to the 1940s or early 1950s. Butane was the principal source of fuel for cigarette lighters from the latter part of the 1940s, but lighter fetishists continued to love the distinctive odour of the older naphtha, which this lighter, with its saturated (now dried-out)



wick, exudes, at least in memory. Such storied table lighters are less common than the snow globes and paperweights to which I compare them, but mine is of course by no means unique: it is a mass-produced object, not one of individual craftsmanship. Googling *aquarium + table lighter*, I learn that Dunhill produced several so-called aquarium table lighters in the 1950s. The bodies are described by online antiquarians as being made of Lucite. Lucite, like Perspex or Plexiglass, is a brand name that has taken the place of the product name itself, the product being high quality, crystal-clear acrylic: polymethyl methacrylate. These Dunhill lighters are hand carved and painted in exquisite, art nouveau detail, with scenes of tropical fish and marine vegetation, and they fetch several thousand pounds at auction.

On Pinterest, I come across other, more geometric pieces dating from the 1970s, in which small objects—shells, insects, watch and clock parts—are held in acrylic resin. I also find, far more modestly priced, a tubular Perspex lighter and another hexagonal one, both presumed to date from the late 1940s or early 1950s, and both with contents that replicate those of my table lighter: sand, shell, miniature seahorse, starfish, coral and seagrass.

In its miniaturisation and realistic detail, this embalmed space is a perfect, artificial kingdom. That is the term—*artificial kingdom*—that Celeste Olalquiaga uses in her elaborate, baroque bid to describe and define the experience of kitsch. ‘If the souvenir is the commodification of a remembrance,’ Olalquiaga writes, ‘kitsch is the commodification of the souvenir.’ I am thinking again of the laquered castanets my mother bought in Madrid. And if, as Walter Benjamin has it, the commodity form is one that is (always) already permeated with sentimentality, with kitsch, we are at least twice removed from nature, stuck with fixed meanings, with consumable objects that present memory as always already pre-digested and pre-given. This lighter is to an aquarium what an aquarium is to the open sea.

Olalquiaga describes the domestic aquarium, along with pteridomania (the fad for collecting ferns), as a mid-nineteenth century mass phenomenon: the creation of an ostensibly organic scenario in miniature, one which enhanced but also reproduced the Victorian interior for which it was destined. In Victorian times, such aquariums encompassed ‘the main aspects of modern popular culture, in particular



the inducement of visual pleasure through the scenographic images and the miniaturization proper to most souvenirs.' Olalquiaga compares the seabed and its deposit of marine life and forgotten shipwrecks to the human mind, the deep strata of the unconscious, 'here nacre, there emotion.' The seabed in an orb or block of resin works on several levels to invoke an inchoate intensity of feeling; its containment in glass or resin, and its miniaturisation offering an experience in which enchantment is coupled with a sense of mastery.

Since certain categories of kitsch—especially vintage kitsch—have become fashionable, it is hard not to see this lighter through an ironic, postmodern lens, or framed by at least one set of quotation marks. That postmodern prism accommodates and flattens out the differences between objects of high culture and those of mass or popular culture, especially if these have acquired a vintage patina through the passage of several decades. The adoption of *kitsch* as a term of affection is certainly opposed to its earlier uses in the time of high modernism (from the 1910s to the 1950s), a period which saw the growth of both mass culture and of what came to be known as the avant-garde. Kitsch is a by-product of mass production and was the term used to refer to aesthetic forms that aimed to please 'the masses' in opposition to the elite appeal of the art of the avant-garde.

Cultural theorist Sianne Ngai has suggested that in the age of social media, the adoption of certain new aesthetic categories such as *zany*, *cute* and *interesting*—categories of which *kitsch* is always a potential sub-category—reflects a world of speedy mass production and circulation and has become a way of processing the hyper-commodified, mass-produced, mass-mediated objects of late capitalism. This lighter is the product of new technologies in a similar context of heady and optimistic mass production: the utopianism that accompanied the invention of new materials in the mid-twentieth century, before anyone began thinking of the devastating effects of plastic pollution, which only began to be noticed by scientists carrying out plankton studies in the ocean in the 1960s and '70s. We are, of course, now well into the silent spring of plastic pollution.

The technology that made this lighter possible was the invention of Perspex (call it Plexiglass or Lucite), which occurred in the 1930s, the same decade that influential art critic Clement Greenberg wrote



his famous essay, 'The Avant-Garde and Kitsch' (1939). The aim of the avant-garde was to promote and defend purist aesthetic standards, while its opposite, kitsch, Greenberg proposes, is a cheapening or lowering of aesthetic standards brought about by consumerism. Kitsch, when associated with the nostalgia that was frequently present in the style of decoration of middle-class homes, might be considered a facile parody of the beauty in nature, offering the delivery of an already processed aesthetic effect. A little like sentimentality which offers pre-processed emotions, kitsch offers pre-digested beauty.

## Smoking

My parents loved smoking. My mother was a natural, an accomplished celebrant of the lighting up ritual. Even in old age when her hands shook uncontrollably, the practice was refined, almost liturgical. She knew the art of the long, easy intake and then the slow, insouciant exhalation, the plume curling out of her nostrils or the pursed valve of her coloured-in lips, her dark eyes narrowed. I do not recall in such pictorial detail my father's smoking, perhaps because he died so many years earlier. I am not sure why I never asked my mother when it was that she began smoking, since it played such an essential role in her life. My brother says he'd asked, and that both our parents smoked by their late teens, he in Palestine, she in China.

Many photographs of my young parents show them looking languorous, lit cigarette in hand. There they are, separately or together, seated or standing, returning the gaze of the camera lens, pausing between one drag and the next. Smoking made them interesting and alive. You never heard them saying: 'I do not want a cigarette,' as the unnamed narrator of Lesley Stern's *The Smoking Book* (1999) says, testing herself. Stern's memoir is at once a dissection of addiction and a paean to the sensuous pleasures of smoking. '*I do not want a cigarette.*' To say this is terrifying. It is tantamount to saying: "I do not want." /To not-want: this is to be dead, or if not dead, then boring. Dead boring.' In the same vein, novelist and critic Gabriel Josipovici laments his dry throat and bloated tongue, but, he writes, 'whenever I try to imagine a life without cigarettes, without *any* cigarettes, *ever*, I realise it is a life I do not want.'



I think my siblings and I took our parents' smoking habit as a fact of nature. I feel a thrill of recognition reading, in *Nicotine* (2011)—Gregor Hens' terse memoir as the account of an addiction—that when he was three or four years old, he thought that smoking was his father's actual job. I would have been forgiven for thinking the same about either of my parents, except that worrying about their income constituted such a regular point of conversation and argument in our home that I knew by osmosis about my father's jobs and how, at least as far as my mother was concerned, he never earned enough. I knew, too, about my mother's jobs, mostly as a legal secretary. She made some good friends in those offices, and I associate her at her most efficient and friendly and normal with that environment.

For both my parents, smoking signalled a pause, an interruption in the flow of certain activities, or their cessation: eating was the most obvious example, but there were others, such as cooking for my mother—she was resourceful and efficient in the kitchen—or fiddling with tiny tweezers, a magnifying glass and old stamps on a neat bed of green baize for my father. Then, the lighting of the cigarette. And of course, I still cringe to think of my parents—in both of whom I saw qualities that other grown-ups must have considered quite sexy—lighting up after intercourse.

My father smoked while working, but as far as I know, my mother did not, neither did she use smoking to launch or celebrate an activity. This is something that various writers and artists have done—have performed—not least for the camera, turning into a moment of theatre the need for the abrasive vapour and the quick hit, jump starting the creative process, the mind wired and alert. The first images that come to mind are of male artists and writers whose persona leans heavily on the idea of a possibly charismatic, phallic machismo: Picasso, Jackson Pollock, Ernest Hemingway. Streaming in after these associations are mental images (confirmed by, or compared with, those thrown up by Google) of writers posing with cigarettes, as though momentarily disrupted from a steady flow of profound thought: Albert Camus, Samuel Beckett, Dylan Thomas. But not only men, not by a long shot: Virginia Woolf, Susan Sontag, Joan Didion and Clarice Lispector, all glacial. Patricia Highsmith. Fran Lebowitz, never without a cigarette. Ingeborg Bachmann, who died in a fire probably caused by her own



cigarette. And Jenny Diski, who wrote about smoking and died of it. I regret not having bought her quirky and beautiful book, *Stranger on a Train* (2002), with its evocative and meandering subtitle, *Daydreaming and Smoking Around America with Interruptions*, as a gift for my mother. I wonder now if my mother would have experienced a certain resistance in identifying with that narrator: a person for whom the point of a train journey was to puff away in the smoking carriage, the comfort of it as well as the relaxed, random social interaction among people previously unknown to one another, thrown together in an enclosed space by a shared practice. The fact that the practice became increasingly socially maligned was, for my mother, entirely irrelevant. I think she enjoyed those stuffy, hazy boxes into which—was it in the 1990s—smokers were banished, before even those facilities were banned from restaurants and hotel lobbies and airports.

So many images of smoking in photographs, in movies, in books. I want to excavate along this seam... Why do so, other than for the gratification afforded by taxonomy, for the pleasure of always connecting? But that, for me, has always been a satisfaction worth pursuing. My mind rattles along this track, knowing I shall return to it; first, I am alert to images of smoking in whatever I happen to be reading, then I hunt down things to read *because* they contain images or descriptions of smoking, paeans to it. And so, musing on my mother's smoking, recollecting how vehement she was in her desire not to give up, how she loved nothing more than a long hard draw after the first sip of morning coffee, I think of Fran Lebowitz, who describes smoking as her hobby and wonders, on visiting Seattle—one of the first cities in the USA to ban smoking—why you can find coffee twenty-four hours a day: 'I couldn't understand,' she muses, 'what was this coffee for?'

I also find a wonderful description of smoking in Elizabeth Hardwick's peerless novel-essay-memoir *Sleepless Nights* (1979), in which a character called Louisa is described as spending the entire day in a 'blue, limpid boredom.' All the characters in *Sleepless Nights*, etched in Hardwick's incisive, startling prose, drift into view, and then out of it again. They remain brightly lit and in focus for a few pages, but then we never see them again. Louisa uses cigarettes as a supplement to her boredom (an *addition* is the word that Hardwick uses). The boredom itself is described first as a narcotic, then as a 'large friendly intimate.'



Reading this section prompts me to wonder whether, for my mother, smoking was an accessory to ennui, and whether ennui itself was the real addictive substance. But her habit was not a jovial intimate. Rather, it was a demon made of frustration. More than a contribution to the opiate of boredom, I think it was the repetitive, ritualised aspect of smoking that my mother craved.

This is not to suggest that the tarry taste of nicotine and the hit were not in themselves lifelong incentives to her. But the gestural and cyclical nature of smoking—its repeated solicitations to begin again, hand lifted to lips; to inhale at a particular pace and rhythm—served as a kind of numbing reassurance that time wasn't really passing. From start to finish, the ritual had its rhetoric, its dramatisation and duration: first the promising crackle of cellophane and the peeling of foil, then the light smack of the unlit tip on a flat surface, and finally that same tip teetering and smouldering atop the diminishing shaft. And then the almost violent stubbing out, the ashtray filling with acrid butts.

When smoking became unfashionable and then downright frowned upon and prohibited, my mother continued to sneak fags into the bathrooms of public places, stepping out nonchalantly several minutes later, reeking and lying.

Knowing what is generally known today about passive smoking, about addiction *in utero*, about the effects on children of sitting in cars filled with the haze of their parents' habit, I am surprised that my siblings and I are not smokers. My brother smoked for a short while, my sister never. I managed around five or six a day through the decade or so spanning between, and including, two intense love affairs with men who belonged to other women, while I was between marriages, thus frittering away the time I might have been having babies or working harder at what others called my career. The smoking, especially with A in Lisbon, was also very much part of erotic play, since when I was with him, I never lit up on my own, preferring, Lauren Bacall-like, to put to my lips those *cigarros* that had been in his mouth, held and lit between his lips. During both those affairs, with R and with A, cigarettes also served as accomplices to solitary, agitated mooching. Waiting time. The time of someone else's predictable, endless lateness.

Nowadays, on very rare occasions, I cadge a cigarette at a party from someone who is enjoying gasping in that corrosive stuff with the frosty



night air. My last partner, P, who walked out of my life at the start of the second lockdown in 2020, witnessed this once outside a restaurant in Munich and I could see he found it a turn on. I knew it was really all about the hand gesture and the self-consciously smouldering look I gave him. I knew how much he would have hated being continuously assailed by the stale, burned odour that he associated with his mother and all her yellowed possessions.

On those rare occasions that I do light up, although the hit immediately makes my head spin and causes gall to fill my mouth, I know that if I had cigarettes at home, I would smoke them despite hating the taste and the aftertaste. I suspect that, without actually smoking, I have the personality of a smoker, a characteristic that Gregor Hens describes in his account of kicking the habit, for which immersing himself in the Feldenkrais Method was galvanising.

As I have said, I never heard either of my parents speak of giving up smoking. Never. Not for them the teasing, Sisyphean challenge of the last cigarette, an allegory that has enjoyed sublimely droll moments in fiction and memoirs alike. I am thinking of David Sedaris smoking his last cigarette three times in a bar at Charles de Gaulle airport; of Simon Gray smoking himself to death; but, also, of the hapless character Tom Brodzinski in Will Self's postmodern-postcolonial satire *The Butt* (2010). Tom flicks the smouldering butt of his last cigarette off the balcony of his holiday apartment, and it lands on the head of an ancient geezer on the floor below. Tom suffers *ad absurdum*—indeed he is the butt of—the moral and bureaucratic consequences of his action as the dark and hilarious plot unfurls. This all takes place in an unnamed country that is a lot like Australia, in which the rule of 'Anglo law' tussles with varied tribal customs. Lawlessness and pernicky legalism come face to face in Tom's journey to the heart of the country to make reparations to the tribe offended by the butt in question. Rather than romanticising local tribal customs, that act of reparation itself turns out to be a ruse thought up by a diabolical, Kurtz-like social anthropologist and his offspring, who, with shamanic perversity, turn out to have invented all the local customs. The literary resonances here are multiple and thrillingly enlist the knowing reader to crow: Kafka meets Conrad meets Graham Greene meets William Boyd meets Paul Bowles. With a liberal smattering of Evelyn Waugh.



The most celebrated performance of the ritual of the last cigarette is that of Italo Svevo's character, Zeno, repeatedly announcing his decision to give up to his psychoanalyst, and just as often reneging. As a student, Zeno had to repaper his room, having covered it with jottings of the dates of every single last cigarette. He speaks of the 'last cigarette' as the emblem of his desire both for activity and for 'calm, clear, sober thought.' And he understands that smoking has something to do with time:

You strike a noble attitude and say: 'Never again!' But what becomes of the attitude if you keep your word? You can only preserve it if you keep on renewing your resolution. And then Time, for me, is not that unimaginable thing that never stops. For me, but only for me, it comes again.

For Zeno, last cigarettes have a taste all of their own. With self-delusion given free rein, Zeno's confessions bring to light the ways in which dependency curtails freedom. As Will Self pithily puts it in his excellent introduction to Gregor Hens' memoir, *The Confessions of Zeno* (1923) is a 'minatory portrait of the way habit crimps the psyche.' The reiterative performance of 'the last cigarette' is the trope that hyperbolises the enslaving effects of all habit.

My father was known to have two cigarettes on the go simultaneously, one in hand, the other with its long, heavy excrescence of ash, glowing on the lip of a heavy, jaundiced ashtray. But that never led him—as it had led Gregor Hens' father—to the thought that the habit had got out of control. The lung cancer of which he was to die at fifty-five was surely that alarm gong come too late, and it served as no such warning to my mother. I do not think she submitted to the truism that all smokers lie: she seemed proud of the addiction. She never regarded her smoking habit as a form of enslavement: she wasn't a political being and didn't express her concerns in terms of freedom.

Rather, for her, smoking blended the idea of permissible pleasure—it was certainly that when she was young—with the no lesser pleasure of annoying other people. A cigarette was something she could readily weaponise in the various threats she practiced, not least, that of doing herself in. Yes, she would give up the ghost rather than give up smoking. For the three decades that she survived my father, she dramatised her widow's grief—an acting-out of what were, initially, real feelings of



bewilderment and loss—by declaring her desire to join him. Smoking would help. She loved flirting with the association of smoking with death. With a smirk, she would ask to be buried, when the time came, with a pack of Kents so that she might continue to smoke in the hereafter.

## Lighter

The marine table lighter had been decorative rather than functional for some time before it came into my possession: probably the naphtha had dried up, the wick worn down. Together with a chunky, orange and brown ceramic ashtray dating from the 1970s and the grainy colour photograph of my father beaming, also from the 1970s, it was a secular shrine, the commemoration of a smoker's life.

In arresting time and encapsulating pastness, the object of nostalgia also serves as a *memento mori*, impelling us to consider our timeline, our brevity. But for Celeste Olalquiaga, the hermit crab embalmed in a glass orb stands not only for the immobilising power of death but also for an imaginative capability, the reversal of time's sagittal propulsion. It stands for what she describes as 'the slow intensity of amazement' that is entailed in bringing all dead objects back to life. Rebirth via artefact. This notion is of course not unique to the marine table lighter. I am struck by how simply the act of paying close attention to an object performs such a revival. In its resuscitation, the examined object becomes newly and differently available to thought, to connections, to association, to affect.

The first memories I have of this lighter are from early in my childhood, before we left Israel, just short of my eighth birthday. Our flat was on Weizmann Street, south of Bnei Dan Street in Tel Aviv, and a very short walk from the Yarkon River. On its banks in this part of town, there is a wooded park where my brother and I would sometimes play in the stippled shade. I don't remember who would take us there, I presume sometimes our mother, sometimes our grandmother

I can see us at this time and in this place: Tel Aviv in the early 1960s. Our flat is in a compact, white, modernist block with a patch of lawn in front, a small date palm planted in the centre. The architecture is typical Tel Aviv, with its Bauhaus legacy. The early buildings of the modern city were designed by German Jewish architects who immigrated there, but later ones like this (dating, I would guess, from the late 1940s or early



1950s) boasted a similar geometric style. In the 1960s and 70s, balconies were frequently—some have said too frequently, obsessively—closed in with plastic shutters on aluminium frames, submitting to a social pressure to extend the privacy of limited interior spaces. By 1960, some of our neighbours had installed an earlier system of asbestos shutter: I remember the heavy, wide slats positioned vertically, and angled in such a way as to close completely or to allow in some light and air. They were widely known by their brand name, Trisol, first manufactured in 1957. Our upstairs and next-door neighbours had them by the time we emigrated to South Africa in November 1962. But our balcony, as far as I remember, remained open to the elements throughout this time. My parents were pretty skint.

My brother and I shared the bedroom that gave onto this balcony; my parents slept in the living room that also had a door leading to the balcony, where we ate on those thrumming summer evenings; the memory of those evenings is now entirely wrapped, for me, in the gossamer of nostalgia. In the living room, a sofa bed, two armchairs, a coffee table, the upright piano, a large radio. Though they were not native Israelis, like most Israelis, my parents' preferred style was 'modern,' not 'traditional.' The whole ethos of Israel was opposed to the styles of the old country, of back then. The sofa was mid-century, clean lines and upholstered in a black and yellow fabric. On the coffee table, cigarettes and that lighter with its fascinating, suffocated seascape.

The lighter travelled with my parents from Tel Aviv to Johannesburg in 1962. In late March 2012, after my mother's death, its companions on the journey to my home in England included a stash of photographs from a cardboard box at the foot of my mother's bed; a small, red leather jewellery box filled with many pairs of inexpensive, gleaming clip-on earrings and other gewgaws; and that plastic laundry carousel with her underwear still attached to it. The carousel still hangs—shaming, unnerving—in my studio, repeatedly nudging me to decide upon its fate. The table lighter, however, is smugly sure of its fate: it stays with me. How could I do anything but keep such a strange, compelling object?

Small enough to pocket, more than the smell of naphtha, the lighter emits the ineradicable odour of childhood. The marine world it contains still exercises upon me the powerful, coercive attraction of *multum in parvo*: the sense of dominion won through the visual possession



of a world writ small. Such a teeny quotation of the real world tests the relationship between scale and meaning. There is no mimetic representation, just the actual presentation of something made strange by its scale and context. As a miniature *tableau vivant*, this lighter is not so much an image of vitality as its opposite: fossilised, mortified. Serving simultaneously to signal life and life's arrest, it is uncannily like a photograph, since photography too has played across that same vital boundary. Photography too dances around a line that both separates life from death and brings them closer together.

The lighter immerses me in the flickering, adjourned time of reverie. Like the temporality of the unconscious, reverie occupies an endless present tense. This too is the tense of free association, of associative thinking. And so, I see it in my mind's eye, occupying its place in my parents' several homes in Johannesburg, always on that coffee table. Near it, there is a wooden box holding cigarettes. The box has a tin intaglio copy of Rembrandt's *Night Watch* (1642) on its lid, and so, true to the contiguities that free association fosters, the lighter now also makes me think of Rembrandt.

Each time I encounter it—in other words, when I pay attention to it—this lighter instigates a particular episode of time travel. Into this temporal bubble, Theo and Fay float; both young, healthy. My father was to die of smoking twenty years later in Johannesburg, but in Tel Aviv, in the summer of 1962, smoking is still glam. I am transported to the time I run round and round the palm tree in the garden and step straight into a ground nest of bees, piercing the close late afternoon air with my screams. My father is still at work. My mother rushes to see what's wrong and helps me up the two flights of stairs to our flat. She removes the sting from my foot with her eyebrow tweezers and rubs the swelling with honey. 'This works,' she says, exercising her witchy, maternal brand of homeopathy. I feel cared for.

When, over five decades later, I write an email to my brother about this day, which I know he remembers since we've recollected it in mirth over the years, he replies: *Your bee sting was recognised as being a national medical emergency on that day.*

My mother has me lean into the deck chair on the balcony, my leg elevated and swathed in a turban of bandages, creating, if nothing else, an effect of analgesia. She brings me a tumbler of iced juice that



I sip slowly, watching the darkening world go by in the space sliced by balcony rails. She's inside the flat and I'm out, and I hear the clink-clink of ice in her tumbler and the clang of a whisky bottle and a quick blast of soda from the syphon, then a glug, and the clack of glass on table. I can almost hear these sound effects now, detect them as the work of a Foley artist for a movie, the movie of my life. Then the visuals come into focus. My mother steps back onto the balcony, a cigarette held loosely in one nonchalant hand, the marine lighter in the other. Click click. Then click again. Though in his email, my brother has also written *that lighter never worked*, I clearly remember the flame flaring blue, illuminating my mother's nose and mouth scarily.

She takes a deep drag and then exhales a slow, steady stream of white.

*You'll be fine tomorrow*, she says.



