**Mishy Harman (narration):** This episode ends in a cemetery. But it starts somewhere else altogether.

When Etgar Keret’s first collection of short stories, *Tzinorot*, was published in 1992, he wasn’t yet *Etgar Keret* the award-winning, internationally-acclaimed author and screenwriter. He was, rather, just another twenty-four-year-old from Tel Aviv who wrote creative, odd, and sometimes disturbing, short stories. And, appropriately perhaps, when *Tzinorot* first came out, it was basically ignored.

**Etgar Keret:** I think it sold about eight hundred copies, so I think very few bookstores had my book.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** So like any other young and eager author, Etgar would occasionally pop into a bookstore, and check whether or not they carried *Tzinorot*.

**Mishy Harman:** So it was exciting for you when you would go into a bookstore and see that they had it?

**Etgar Keret:** Yes, yes. You know, I would consider it a good day like because I… I wouldn’t take it for granted that they’re supposed to have it.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** But, as you can imagine, it’s slightly embarrassing to look for your own book. So Etgar came up with what he thought was a fail-proof strategy: When the salesman would approach him and ask if he needed any help, Etgar - without missing a beat - would blurt out the name of a different Israeli author, Yehoshua Kenaz.

**Etgar Keret:** Because alphabetically Kenaz is right next to Keret, and so if they show me where the Kenaz book is, I can see where my book is.

**Mishy Harman:** So they would say like “yeah, we have Kenaz books over there” and then you would like peep to see if they… if they had your book?

**Etgar Keret:** Yes, yes.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** All in all, this shtick worked pretty well. Until one day, in a bookstore on Bazel Street in Tel Aviv, Etgar randomly ran into his boss, Eitan.

**Etgar Keret:** And he saw me kind of looking at the shelves, and he said to me, “you’re looking for your book, ha? You want to see if it’s in the store.” And that was actually what I was doing, so like, you know, it was kind of an awkward moment because I didn’t feel too great admitting it, but it felt even worse denying it. So I said, “yes.”

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Reluctantly, Etgar filled him in on his ingenuous Kenaz method.

**Etgar Keret:** And we were standing in such a way that he was facing the street and I was kind of… I was looking at the cashier, you know. And then he started shouting, “Yehoshua, Yehoshua.” And I said, “yes yes, Yehoshua Kenaz.”

**Mishy Harman:** What did you think when he was yelling “Yehoshua, Yehoshua”?

**Etgar Keret:** I thought that it’s strange, because you know, like… I mean usually like when I say, you know, “Marcel Proust,” people don’t go shouting “Marcel, Marcel,” you know?

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Etgar didn’t really understand what the hell was going on. But as he contemplated his boss’ bizarre reaction, a short, middle-aged man walked into the store. Eitan, the boss, called him over, and introduced them. “Etgar,” he said with a bit of a smirk, “meet Yehoshua. Yehoshua Kenaz.”

**Etgar Keret:** And he said to him, “Yehoshua, you know Etgar just told me that whenever he wants to see if his book is in the store he asks if they have your books.” And I’ve realized that I’m meeting for the first time Yehoshua Kenaz, who...

**Mishy Harman:** Oh, you had never met him before?

**Etgar Keret:** No, I’ve never met him before and he’s a writer whom I really admired. So if I would ever imagine us meeting, it would be kind of in this literary dinner or, I don’t know, festival event, and not in a bookstore where somebody introduces me as a guy who pretends to look for his book whenever he wants to see if *his* book is in the store. So I just kind of looked at him, you know, a little bit like a deer caught in the headlight. But Yehoshua Kenaz just looked at me and smiled and he said, “oh, whenever I look for my book, I ask them if they have any Yoram Kaniuk books.”

**Mishy Harman (narration):** *[Laugh]*Etgar laughed nervously.

**Etgar Keret:** Yes, I’ve laughed, you know, and there are many kinds of laughters. And I think this was kind of a laughter of I say ‘ufff… OK. Things are OK,’ you know?

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Things would ultimately turn out to be more than OK for Etgar. Two years later, he published his second collection, *Missing Kissinger*. And when that book came out people all over the country started to discover Etgar, and made him into a household name.

Now, my older brother Oren must have been one of the few who *did* buy Etgar’s first book. I remember it well.

It had a pinkish cover and Oren - who kept it on the nightstand next to his bed - seemed to be reading it *constantly*. And like more or less everything my big brother did at the time, that immediately categorized the book - at least in my eyes - as something *very* cool. So one day, when Oren was away in the army, I secretly borrowed it. The very first Etgar Keret words I ever read were in a short paragraph printed on the back cover. And as it turns out, they were written under quite dramatic circumstances.

See, when *Tzinorot* was almost ready to go to print, Etgar told me...

**Etgar Keret:** The publishing house sent me a back cover text that I really didn’t like. And I kept nagging them that I want to have a different back cover text. And at some stage they say, “OK, you know what? You can publish whatever you want, but it just has to be very very short.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Etgar thought about it, tried out a few different things, and was never quite satisfied.

**Etgar Keret:** I didn’t know what to write, but at the same time it was Hanukkah and I built a menorah. It was made out of plastic toys. And when I lit the menorah, then it caught fire and it started burning and the table also kind of caught fire so there was this mini fire in my apartment and I was able to manage it and to put that fire off. But I inhaled a lot of smoke so I found myself in an ER.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** The doctor in the ER, he remembers, looked suspiciously…

**Etgar Keret:** Like George Clooney. Like he was very very kind of handsome. He has this kind of Israeli pilot silvery hair and blue eyes.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** He came up to Etgar and said…

**Etgar Keret:** “So son, tell me what’s wrong.” And I said to him, “I build a menorah made out of p… pp… plastic…” And he put a hand on my shoulder and he said, “son, you don’t have to tell me everything, just tell me the important stuff.” And I said to him, “I can’t breathe.” And he smiled, and he said, “you see, that was easy.”

**Mishy Harman (narration):** The Israeli George Clooney treated him and went off to charm other patients. And it was then and there, on the prescription pad the doctor accidentally left behind, that Etgar wrote the paragraph for the back cover.

Here it is.

**Etgar Keret:** “Asthma Attack.” When you have an asthma attack, you can’t breathe. When you can’t breathe, you can hardly talk. To make a sentence, all you get is the air in your lungs, which isn’t much. Three to six words if that. You learn the value of words. You rummage through the jumble in your head, choose the crucial ones, and those cost you too. Let healthy people toss out whatever comes to mind the way you throw out the garbage. When an asthmatic says “I love you,” and when an asthmatic says “I love you madly,” there’s a difference. The difference of a word. And a word is a lot. It could be “stop,” or “inhaler.” It could even be “ambulance.”

**Mishy Harman:** Etgar, that feeling of not being able to breathe, is something that’s accompanied you your whole life, right?

**Etgar Keret:** Well, I was born an asthmatic, and I think that when I try to look back at my childhood I think that one of my first memories is being taken to an ER, because I had breathing problem. It would happen like, I think, twice a month, and those drives to the hospital, in which I tried to communicate first with my parents, and then with the doctors, and I hardly have any air, and I have to kind of calculate what word I want to punctuate because you know you can hardly speak, so you can say “pain” or “light” or “mother.” It gives you some kind of perspective that when you look at communication or dialogue you see some kind of hierarchy. Not all the words are worth the same. Some of them are crucial, some of them would say a lot. Some of them you like because by using one word you can say something that is almost like a sentence, you know? But you don’t need to spend a lot of breath on it. And this kind of idea of an economy of speech followed me all my life, always sending me back to those kind of trips to the ER. And I think that you know when I write I write very short texts, and they are very concise, and it all goes back to this idea of saying to myself, ‘what is the important thing to say?’ ‘How can I say it in fewer words?’ Looking at asthma, it never felt like a problem, it felt as if it was something that had defined me. That had made me who I am. For example, if you would say to me “would you rather not have asthma?” then, of course I would say “yes.” But I couldn’t help thinking that if I wouldn’t have had asthma, I would have become a different human being.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** So while asthma might have shaped Etgar the author, it also posed a serious health threat once the pandemic began.

**Etgar Keret:** In a deep sense, I’m not that afraid of dying, but I am terrified of not being able to breath. I think that when the corona arrived for the first time this idea of kind of having corona and maybe like because I have a background illness, that I could die, became very very concrete and very very terrifying just because of the sole fact that the way that I’ll die will be that I’ll stop breathing. And when it comes to not being able to breathe, I know how it feels and it’s not fun at all.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey, I’m Mishy Harman, and this is Israel Story. Our episode today - “**Six Feet (Under)**” - is the sixth, and *almost* final stop on our **“Alone, Together”** journey.

You know, throughout the series we’ve told many stories of people dealing - in different ways - with COVID-19. But one thing everyone we’ve heard from had in common, is that they have all - thankfully - survived the pandemic. Some got sick, others didn’t, but they all lived to tell the tale.

And that, obviously, isn’t true of everyone. Death has sadly been all around us for the last six months.

**Mishy Harman:** So, doctor, we’re taking today on the very last day of August 2020, and - as of now - how many COVID-19 deaths have there been in Israel?

**Asher Salmon:** Just above nine hundred.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** That’s oncologist and health management specialist Dr. Asher Salmon.

**Asher Salmon:** I am the head of international relation of the Ministry of Health and part of the national COVID-19 team.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Nine hundred plus casualties in a population of roughly nine million, that’s about one one-hundredth of one percent.

**Asher Salmon:** We had around three hundred mortality cases during the first wave, and another six hundred from, I would say, mid-June.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** So yeah, things are getting worse.

**Asher Salmon:** As we did respond to the first wave in a very, I would say, swift and sharp way, we finish the first wave only with three hundred cases, dead cases. That created a situation that people were, you know, trying to say, ‘oh, everything is a conspiracy’ and ‘nothing really had happened’ and ‘this problem is not as serious as the authorities were trying to convince us.’ And that is part of the problem now. So I usually say that we became victims of our success of the first wave. We are now experiencing a massive second wave, which is much much broader than we did see during the first wave.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Like everywhere else around the world, older people are dying at a much higher rate.

**Asher Salmon:** More than eighty-five percent of our cases were for senior citizens above the age of seventy. And we did have mortality cases in every age but we seldomly saw young people dying. And when we did have young people dying it was usually due to a complicated situation with a patient suffering from a major chronic medical problem.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Underlying respiratory conditions, like Etgar’s asthma, have become a major concern for many people. But despite that persistent fear, Etgar says that COVID has actually been an extremely fruitful period for him.

**Etgar Keret:** I think this had been the best days of my life,because I think that as an artist the effort that you make is to be in dialogue with the authentic. And to be authentic basically the first thing that you need to shut off is the force of inertia. You know, usually, like - I don’t know - you wake up in the morning, you have to take your kid to school, you have those three meetings, you have to go to the bank, you have to do all those kind of things. And as a writer, you try to look inside and see where I wanna go, what I want to do. And this basically had became the default in the time of corona. For me, it kind of made everything easier. It’s as if like, you are trying to concentrate and suddenly all the noises around you stop. So for me really, writing is kind of a sophisticated way of crying for help, you know? If everything is stable and everything is OK then what’s the point in writing? I only write when… when I feel anxious, or I feel angry, or I feel helpless. And this is a good time to feel any of those three things.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** So in the past few months Etgar has been writing non-stop. And our first story is his latest, still unpublished, nonfiction essay. And like so many of Etgar’s stories, it all happens in his mind. **Act I - Rock Solid Wife.**

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**Ishai Golan (narration):** Since the plague broke out, I’ve finally been able to imagine my own death. It’s not that I didn’t try before, but every time I lay in bed, shut my eyes, and tried to envision my final breaths, something always went wrong. If I pictured losing control of my car on the highway, for example, drifting between lanes with my wheels locked up at sixty miles per hour, while hostile drivers honked at me furiously - in the end, seconds before the crash, my car would slide onto the shoulder, and although there was a lot of drama and airbags inflating, I somehow always came out of it alive.

And it wasn’t just car wrecks. There was everything: Terrorist attacks, violent skirmishes with the neighbors, an on-air heart attack in the middle of a cultural show on public access television. However bad I tried to make it, in the end I always survived.

Some of the visions ended with me being interviewed, my hair rumpled, on the evening news. In others I would wake up in hospital and my son would fall on me with hugs. But all the incidents ended, despite my genuine efforts, with no casualties.

And then came the coronavirus and sorted everything out. Now I can close my eyes every night when I go to bed and visualize myself being rushed to hospital with severe respiratory distress. The few exhausted doctors still remaining in the crowded ER have gone off the deep end completely. My wife politely asks a young bleary-eyed doctor to examine me, explaining that I’m high-risk because I have asthma. The doctor gives her a vacant stare. He’s thinking about something else. Maybe what his own death will look like when the time comes. Or a shower. I try to smile - I read somewhere that when people smile they arouse empathy, and that’s why conmen smile a lot - so I put on my most charming grin. If only this child-doctor would glance in my direction he would immediately see into my humanity, and the smile on my ashen face would remind him of an uncle he loved as a child, who died in a diving accident. But he doesn’t. He’s looking at something else. He’s looking at a hairy giant with a receding hairline who’s standing at the nurse’s station yelling like a madman. I gathered from his bellows that he’s been waiting over three hours for someone to examine his father. The older nurse at the station asks him to cool down. Instead of answering her, the hairy giant lights a cigarette. A short, security guard with no neck rushes over and tells him to put it out, and the hairy giant says he will, just as soon as a doctor sees his father and not one second sooner. My wife tries to catch the child-doctor’s attention but he ignores her and marches over to the giant and his father. I can feel that no matter how hard I try, I can’t take any air into my lungs. It’s like pushing at a locked door. I’ve known this sensation since childhood, I remember every detail of the asthma attacks. But back then, there was always a tiny bit of air that did get in. I look up at my wife. She’s crying, which drives me mad.

My death is within spitting distance, I’ve already accepted that. Any minute now I’ll be gone. But what’s with the tears? Why do I have to leave the wonderful life I had like this: No sun, no blue sky, a hairy giant screaming and smoking in my face, and my beloved wife crying?

Death is supposed to be like the season finale in the TV series of my life, except that actually, since you’re dead, the next season never happens. And who wants a series’ very last scene to show a weeping family in a crowded, disgruntled emergency room? I say ‘family’ even though my son isn’t here. He’s at home playing Fortnite. Or at least that’s what he was doing when they took me to the hospital. I asked him not to come with us because I was afraid he’d pick up something in the ER. The coronavirus era is not a good time to get sick, even if you are a kid. I’m glad he’s not here to see me finished. If he were, and my wife cried, he would start crying too: When it comes to emotions, he’s a follower.

I want to tell my wife something to make her happy, to distract her, something to make her stop crying. But I can’t talk anymore. I’m dead.

And then I can’t fall asleep all night. I try to talk about it with my wife. I know that coronavirus days are not the best time to open things up, but this whole business is burning inside me like a hemorrhoid and it has to be clarified. “That’s it?” she asks, “that’s what’s bothering you? Not that you’re dying young, or that you’re leaving behind a wife and a child and a rabbit? Just the fact that I’m crying?” I try to explain that the coronavirus, my defective lungs, the collapse of the healthcare system, the hairy giant smoking in the ER - all these are a given. There’s nothing I can do about them. But her crying is a choice. And as far as I’m concerned it’s an extremely troubling one.

“OK,” says my wife in her seemingly-accepting voice (the one she always tries out on muzzled dogs who bark at her on the street). “So what you’re really saying is that, as part of our planning for worst-case scenario, you would like me to work on this? To come prepared, so that when you die right in front of me in the emergency room, I won’t cry?”

I nod excitedly. This is a rare moment. Most of the time she doesn’t really get what I want.

“So if I promise you right now that no matter what happens I won’t cry, and instead I’ll… I don’t know… I’ll just give you a wink?” she wonders. I explain that she doesn’t have to wink, she can just hold my hand and be cool and collected. Like those bereaved mothers who appear on TV to demand that we not give in to terrorism. You can see that it’s difficult for them, that they’re torn apart on the inside, but they project strength, and they keep up appearances. It’s much easier to leave when you know you’re leaving behind you a rock solid wife.

“No problem,” my wife nods, “if it’ll make things easier for you, I’ll do it. No tears. Done deal.”

That night I lie awake in bed again. My wife is asleep, I can hear her regular breaths next to me, and when I close my eyes it’s all there waiting: The pain, the flickering florescent bulbs over my bed, the air refusing to enter my lungs. I can hear the hairy giant yelling and the older nurse trying to calm him down. I struggle to take in air, pushing the door as hard as I can, but it’s locked. Hovering above me, my beautiful wife looks around for the doctor. She knows there’s no chance of finding him but she still tries. I’m running out of air and she senses it. She looks at me, and in her eyes I can see it’s the end. She takes my hand and puts her face close to it. She’s strong, like the moms on TV but much more peaceful. Her green eyes say: It’s a shame you’re leaving, buddy, but everything will be just fine here after you’re gone. I fall asleep.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** Etgar Keret. Actor Ishai Golan read that story, which was translated from Hebrew by Jessica Cohen. Yochai Maital scored and sound-designed the piece with music by Esther Abrami and Papalin.

In addition to everything else, COVID has changed the way we say goodbye to loved ones.

Like - I’m sure - many of you, I’ve sadly attended quite a few virtual funerals and *shivas* this year. And of course there’s something fundamentally strange and devastating about them. I mean, so much of how we grieve is about being together, physically - hugging, supporting, touching. But there’s also an unexpected beauty about it. Zoom has given us the opportunity to participate in funerals around the world, many of which we wouldn’t otherwise have attended. It’s allowed us to create global communities that come together to say farewell.

Our final story today isn’t - strictly speaking - actually a story. It's an audio collage made up entirely of recorded Zoom, YouTube and Facebook Live funerals that Yochai Maital has been collecting over the last few months. Some of the funerals are of public figures, like former Chief Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron, who died of COVID back in April. Others are funerals of private people, who agreed to let us share these intimate and painful moments. The piece includes Jewish, Muslim and Christian services. Religious ones and secular ones. Services in Hebrew and Arabic and English. And in all those languages - which this time we choose not to dub or translate - what we’ll hear is raw emotion. Different people all trying to figure out how to say goodbye from a distance. **Act II: Last Rites.**

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**Speaker 1:** *[In Hebrew]* Do you have enough battery?

**Speaker 2:** Sorry for the technical delay, but...

**Speaker 3:** *[In Hebrew]* Speak so I can hear you a second.

**Speaker 4:** We can all hear you, Charlie. Everyone is here.

**Speaker 5:** A YouTube. A YouTube.

**Speaker 4:** Including over eighty attendees.

**Speaker 6:** *[In Hebrew]* Do you hear me?

**Speaker 7:** Rabbi, your mic is open.

**Speaker 8:** *[In Hebrew]* We can hear, we can hear.

**Speaker 9**: *[In Hebrew]* I ask that… we are trying to observe the rules of staying a minimum of two meters apart.

**Speaker 10**: Alright, just a moment, OK *[sighs]*. OK.

**Speaker 2:** We will all rise, wherever we are, for the prayer e*l malei rachamim*.

**Speaker 11:** *[In Hebrew]* G-d Almighty. Look, look and see how dwindled and weak we have become. And we have no one to lean on other than you.

**Speaker 12:** *[In Hebrew]* I miss you. Go in peace and rest in peace.

**Speaker 13:** *[In Hebrew]* A man of pleasant demeanor, a delicate soul. A man who prized his family above all.

**Speaker 14:** *[In Hebrew]* How I grieve for you, my brother.

**Speaker 15:** *[In Hebrew]* Oy.

**Speaker 14:** *[In Hebrew]* Very pleasant hast thou been unto me.

**Speaker 15:** *[In Hebrew]* Oy to us.

**Speaker 16:** We children appreciate that so many family and friends are able to participate in this gathering in such an extraordinary way.

**Speaker 17:** *[In Hebrew]* We are in a difficult situation. A terrible plague… A terrible plague is out of control throughout the world. Give testimony up above of all the problems the people of Israel are facing.

**Speaker 18:** *[In Hebrew]* My big brother, I never expected to bury you, my brother. You still had a lot of time to be with us. And all because of this damn, disgusting virus.

**Speaker 19:** *[In Hebrew]* May this plague stop at once!

**Speaker 20:** *[In Hebrew]* I will never leave you alone. This whole period, I won’t leave you. I won’t leave you. You are my life, daddy.

**Speaker 10:** I was really looking forward to my grandma being at my wedding.

**Speaker 2:** Next, we'll hear from Jack.

**Speaker 10:** Hold on.

**Speaker 2:** Jack, you're muted.

**Speaker 21:** This is a really hard moment. It is all the more so, because we cannot be physically present because of this terrible pandemic, which claimed you too.

**Speaker 22:** *[In Hebrew]* The broadcast is now paused till we arrive at the gravesite and then it will resume.

**Speaker 23:** Will they be doing the burial for you or they will, will they allow you to put some soil in with your hands?

**Speaker 24:** Well, to be honest, they've all disappeared, so I think we're on our own here.

**Speaker 23:** OK.

**Speaker 24:** And we have shovels.

**Speaker 23:** Can you folks see inside the grave?

**Speaker 25:** We're going to ask David who’s onsite at the cemetery to please begin to lower the casket.

**Speaker 26:** OK, we're ready to lower?

**Speaker 27:** Yes we are.

**Speaker 28:** *[In Hebrew]* When we are done, please stick the sign in the ground.

**Speaker 29:** *[In Hebrew]* Everyone please go to that corner, and step away from the deceased. Everyone.

**Speaker 30:** *[In Hebrew]* It’s not worth it. It’s not worth it.

**Speaker 31:** *[In Hebrew]* In the name of *Khevra Kadisha* we ask for your forgiveness if we harmed you during the preparation for burial. We treated you according to the traditions of Jerusalem, the holy city.

**Many People:** Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the universe, the Just Judge.”

**Speaker 32:** There’s just going to be a little bit of a lag, because of the bandwidth. But we'll try to do this as much in sync as possible, the mourners...

**Speaker 33:** Thank you, Rabbi. There is a link, for shiva. Like in about an hour from now. And we can have more opportunity to comfort each other, laugh... We need some laughter.

**Speaker 34:** *[In Hebrew]* And with that the ceremony is over.

**Speaker 35:** *[In Hebrew]* Two-hundred and thirty people attended? Two-hundred and thirty people saw the funeral.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** Yochai Maital edited that piece.

We still have a little “**Alone, Together**” coda episode coming your way next, and after that - in what we hope isn’t merely wishful thinking on our part - we’ll step away from COVID, and bring you the remainder of the season, full of wonderful stories we can’t wait to share.

Till then, we hope you catch up on all our previous episodes on our site - israelstory.org - or wherever you get your podcasts. You can also follow us on social media - Instagram, Twitter, Facebook - all under Israel Story. And while you’re at it, don’t forget to sign up for our newsletter, so that you never miss an episode. All you have to do is go to israelstory.org/newsletter.

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I’m Mishy Harman, and we’ll be back shortly after Rosh HaShanah with the final coda of **“Alone, Together.”**

**Mishy Harman:** What did your wife say? Did she want you to stay at home?

**Bassam Zagari:** She wanted to divorce me *[laughs]*.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** So till then, stay safe and have a sweet and good new year. *Shana Tova, shalom shalom* and *yalla bye*.

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