

## **A Blast in the Park**

### **FINALIST**

By Gidon Rosenfeld

Walking through the park on a warm summer day is a common weekend activity for many Israelis. My family and I, having just moved to Tel Aviv only a few weeks ago, figured a walk through the park would be a good way to acclimate to the Israeli lifestyle. The park was beautiful; dozens of families filled the green grass, admiring the breathtaking scenery and listening to the chirping birds. The Mediterranean sea could be seen from the hills, sparkling as the sun's rays pierced the clear water. Being an average 13 year old, I loved everything it had to offer. I had yet to adjust to my new home, but the park was a warm welcome.

The day at the park came to an abrupt end soon after we arrived. The wailing of sirens filled the air, sending the happy families running towards the nearest bomb shelter. As we ran with them, an old man sitting on a park bench motioned for us to come sit with him. He assured us that the sirens were nothing to fear, and that they were likely a false alarm or a military drill. But the sight of the frantic families running to take cover said otherwise, and we followed them. Upon arriving at the bomb shelter, a small basement in a run-down apartment building, explosions could be heard from far away. Contrary to what we assumed, the explosions were only the rockets being intercepted by the Iron Dome — the IDF's advanced air defense system.

Inside the shelter, everyone huddled together, conversing about what could be happening outside. Only weeks before, three Israeli teenagers had been kidnapped and killed by Hamas members — causing Israel to conduct an operation with the goal of arresting Hamas militant leaders. The rockets, they assumed, were coming from the Hamas-occupied Gaza Strip. We later found out that the sirens marked the beginning of the 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict, a seven week long military operation which resulted in thousands of casualties. Being too young to understand the gravity of the situation, and too busy observing the roaches crawling on the shelter walls, I stood there in fear hoping we would make it home safely. I wondered if the man on the bench was safe, and if he had decided to take cover.

The sirens eventually died down, and we exited the shelter. As I stepped out of the darkness, I was struck with rays of golden sunlight, immediately warming my entire body. The families returned to the park, the children resumed their game of soccer, and people went on with their day. It was as if nothing had ever happened. As I walked towards the park, I saw the old man, still sitting on the same bench. He waved to us and began to smile. "Welcome to Israel!" he said.