

1

Hello Ella.

I'm dying to see your face right now. How long has it been since we last spoke? Probably a year, more or less? How are you? Still working hard? Still teaching?

You should see me now, how I kept all the scraps from the floor of "the cave" and am still able to keep them together so that I have something to work with. And still after all that patchwork, the first thing that comes to mind when I think of you is persistent and unrelenting teasing.

There you go again making me think about sex. I know things about you, little tidbits I picked up along the way... that you have two girls, you're divorced and that you're an only child. But what's really engraved in my memory of you is how you used to sit there with your perfect fingernails, polished bright red, what else, as if from the beginning of time, and the smoothness of your shins... How I used to quiver at the sight of the moist intersection of your crossed thighs. I remember how I could almost reach out and touch that river of milk flowing next to me... and me pulling back. Always pulling back.

You're probably saying to yourself "there he goes again, his aggression is back", and you're right. I didn't even ask if you'd be comfortable with me writing to you. But you can relax—I'm far, far away in New York, and just like with everything else that happens to me when it comes to you, I feel as if you're the one who made me send this email. You have this power over me. The ability

to pull my strings, even from a distance. I'll try to ignore that thought and take some responsibility, as you yourself told me to do many times. The days here in New York are wonderful. I try to jog in Prospect Park at least twice a week, and I tell myself, this is you, Itamar, and this is your body, and these are your obsessions, and these are your fears, yours and not anybody else's. So, this is me writing. The me who wanted to be seen with you outside "the cave", without your notes and interpretations. As man and woman. Not a day goes by that I don't think about how it could have been between us. How we would have had sex. How I would have fucked you until you begged me to stop. Look at what you're doing to me. For months I've been thinking what to write to you from this place, and in the end what comes out is the same thing that always happens with you, a volcanic eruption of tempestuous words. I can edit it. Delete everything and jot down a few lines like: "Hey Ella, how are you? How are the girls? And work? I'm fine, working hard but all in all, stable and satisfied. I feel that we left off on bad terms and I'd like to get some closure, can we talk?" Yes, had I written something along those lines, I would probably be a lot less threatening, but if I know you—and I do, I know exactly what turns you on. Honesty. Brutal honesty. So while we're being brutally honest, please don't lie to yourself thinking that you kept to the boundaries of the cave. I know you hate it when I call it the cave and we both know that you didn't keep to the boundaries. With almost every word that came out of your mouth lines were crossed. So what if you didn't tell me too much about yourself, or that we didn't really fuck, but do you really think that you can have that kind of control over me without crossing a line? All those funny words you and your colleagues love to use, transference-shmansference, like it's a mechanical procedure that takes place in some research lab and not in a room with walls and a carpet and chairs and people with fingernails and hands and

crossed thighs, where what really happens is an endless mating ritual – and mating is crossing boundaries with a capital C.

I see all those moronic intellectuals snicker: “Well well, transference. That’s exactly transference!”. So many lies they tell themselves, thinking they can control it, that they can quantify touch and words and information, failing to understand that when you put two people in the same room and they start talking, there are no boundaries, no boundaries at all, and it doesn’t matter whether they talk, go down on each other or kiss. The wheels spin and spin and their matter amalgamate, simple physics. You can’t even imagine how many borders I crossed while gazing at you, how long it took me to work up the nerve to do it, to silently look at you, to imagine in meticulous detail how you chose the dress you wore, how you stood in front of the mirror and felt that that was the dress you wanted to wear that day; the top of the bra you chose peeking out from the cleavage, and your lips, entire days during which your lips would cross the border and reach me from the other side, from your beautiful, bountiful and polished country all the way to my wild, shapeless thicket.

So, Ella, you turned forty-one this year, right? I wonder how you look, if you did anything new with your hair, and what about your breasts... Just joking, what I really meant to ask is how you’ve been this past year, whether you’re happy, and satisfied. Will you write back?

Itamar

2

Itamar,

I've read your email several times, feeling the surge of thoughts and emotions it raised in me each time. What a volcanic, accusatory, invasive, and painful outburst.

Indeed, our sessions ended quite abruptly a year ago, and it was certainly not the appropriate way to conclude such a meaningful therapy. It was your decision, and I respected it, but reading your email I am aware of how incomplete it all was.

Itamar, you remember that I repeatedly offered you to come back to our sessions if you changed your mind. You are still welcome to do this, we can find a way.

Do you even remember our sessions? The ones we were so versed in and could lean on for support and meaningful insight. But this—this thing you've unloaded into my inbox—this, no. I don't know where you came to the idea that it is allowed. Did our interaction somehow teach you this?

Ella

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Pain. That's what I'm feeling. Not because you didn't ask how I am doing. It's your condescension that hurts. It hurts to feel you emotionally detached. It hurts to feel you alienating me. Are you seriously suggesting getting back to therapy? I'm in New York. Do you want to have online sessions? That's not even the point. I just wanted to talk. To write. Not therapy. I've asked you twice how you were doing, I asked about the girls, about work, and you didn't even bother to reply. What happened to you that made you change so much in one year? The Ella I remember had a response for everything. You used to stop me and say: "You asked me a question, right? So I would like to try to respond". And your forehead would slightly wrinkle as your hair flipped toward me, and I knew it wasn't only your soul attuned to me at that moment, but your entire being. You would straighten out in your armchair, cross your legs with those perfect high heels that I'd kiss if I could. Where is that Ella? And what kind of question is - "did I teach you this?" No, Ella, you did not teach me this. This is what people do, they look at each other and exhale and speak, and then touch. And it results in penetration, a rape, and the decision to define rape the way it is defined only shows that you've succeeded, you and your colleagues, in shaping the boundaries of the relationship.

But if it was up to me, I'd use completely different parameters to assess how dangerous someone is, how invasive. And actually, here in New York it might work, with all their fake smiles and personal space, but in Israel? Show me one person who has

an issue with space. Quite the opposite. All I remember is bodies pressing against bodies, on the bus, in line at the post office, on the street. Remember that day during the bombing of Tel-Aviv, when the sirens went off in the middle of our session, and suddenly all the walls you built around you came crashing down? I found myself standing in a bomb shelter with you, your two girls and the babysitter. I was so happy, I thought I would explode. The youngest held your hand so tightly, she was crying, and you were trying to calm her down, and the older one looked and asked: "Mom, who is that?" And you answered, "This is Itamar, my friend," and you were beautiful, your maternal fingers wrapped around her hand with just the right amount of strength and slackness. The mark left on your finger by your absent wedding ring made my spirits soar, and at that moment I hitched my wagon onto a star, because friendship is the highest form of love, it has no benefit, only the desire to know someone and make them happy. That's the title you gave me - friend. When the sirens ceased, you had nothing to lean on, Ella darling. There was no protocol, no setting, nothing. The world had turned upside down. And I thanked each member of the squad that had launched the missiles that day and led me into that shelter with you and your girls.

I don't understand. What are you so scared of? What do you think would happen if you answer me like a human being, like a woman receiving an email from a man she knows is attracted to her?

The temperatures are rising here, and I have no idea how I'm going to survive the humid summer. The trees are giving one last bloom before withering, the fruits are heavy and ripe, the streets mercilessly bright and all of this is stirring a sense of discomfort inside me. Do you remember how I used to arrive at the office sweating like a pig, and you would look at me with disgust? I could see that you smelled the sharp sweat too. But what I know about

you, that others don't, is that the more disgusted you are, all the more attracted you are. As if the sweat opens a door to something deeper and wilder, and you want to enter. So what's scaring you, Ella? Come in, it's only me, Itamar. I was never much of a match for you anyway.

Besides, something happened. There's a reason I need to talk to you.

Something happened, something from which there's no return, and the first person I thought to turn to, was you.

Itamar

4

Itamar,

I know it took me a few days to respond, and I'm sorry if this delay hurts you. If something happened and you need my help – write what it's about and I'll try to think it over with you.

I needed some time to process the medley of hopes and accusations you expressed towards me in your emails. I especially needed time to make sense of other sides of your anger. Because somewhere between the mating ritual, the rape, and the penetration into someone else's habitat, it's crucial to say that on the distant brink of your anger there is someone I remember well. And even though he's hiding under layers of desperation, envy, and contempt, I can see him there.

I must ask again, if you remember that man who used to come twice a week and share the secrets and inner workings of his heart? Remember how delicate the words were that we meticulously chose to convey our thoughts? Remember the shared ideas we created? like a language of our own. There is no need to twist and distort our efforts into classifications from a parallel universe. Friendship? Mere attraction between a man and a woman? Teasing? Coaxing to sex-talk? Reading these descriptions is making my heart cringe at the missed opportunity they convey. I genuinely hope that we will be able to have an honest conversation about what you truly have and lack in your life, and of what you truly had and lacked with me.

Ella

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Hurt me? Yes, a little, but from where I stand the concept of pain takes on a different body and volume. The delay in your reply spurred a certain reaction, something moved at the tips of my nerves, and somehow now the common idea that there are no degrees of pain seems absurd to me. There are entire worlds of grief, buildings of pain and neighborhoods of agony, and it's not just their form but also the space they take up. Some are miniature, little dots, and others keep mounting until there's no room for anything else. Until the breadth of it takes up all space and leaves nothing for air. And you suffocate.

What hurts me is not your classic avoidance, that of which you have become so highly skilled, of talking and saying nothing, or of not being present while announcing that you are. Ella, we're also hair and legs and breasts, and idle chatter, and not only these empty cocoons, soul stripped away, until there's nothing left of the world within them. What hurts me is that you can so easily point out my aggression but don't acknowledge your own. You say I'm contemptuous, desperate, envious. Maybe. Contemptuous, for sure. I'm tired of being bound to the conventions of manners and etiquette. Desperate as well. I don't understand how life still exists in this ocean of desperation, so much life. Envious? I don't think so. That's yours. Why do you think I'm jealous? There, I asked a question in the language you want us to speak. I wonder if you'll answer.

Did you really think that you could start a conversation from where we left off? Those who live, who have real relationships with real people, know how important it is to start from these

banal questions and not run straight for the soul's subconscious motive. Just look at my emails compared to yours. Size does matter. Remember what you said to me about my masculinity, when I told you how troubled I was about the size of my cock (and I apologize if I'm violating your holy principle of talking only about the here and now). I'll never forget how you flirted with me because that's when I knew there was a chance we could have a relationship outside of therapy too. First you took my hand and measured the length between its base and the tip of my thumb. You said, "That's how you approximate the size, and I'm telling you, yours isn't small". Then you said that every morning we see ourselves differently, and how elusive our perception of our body is, shifting every day and every hour, and that when it comes to size a lot of it has to do with my self-confidence. That day you wore your tight jeans and the thin white shirt with the hieroglyphic print, and every time you moved your hand I could peek a little further into the slit of the armhole, and I said to myself, Itamar, this woman is perfect.

You know what, Ella, everything you said back then was true, and it helped rays of light penetrate the dark dungeon I was trapped in. But what saved me, what really set me free, wasn't you. It was that woman who came on my cock, and at that moment I was Iron Man. Our conversations were like Tylenol, Ella, but that moment removed the tumor. You yourself once told me, with your bright red lips from the lipstick you had just applied before I came in, that sometimes one must act, enter the flow of life, not avoid it. You said that one should study towards a degree, get married, connect to some familiar human form in order to feel alive. My father had just criticized me that my life was going nowhere, that talent wasn't enough. "You're already thirty-five years old" he said, "you can't go on like this, asking your parents for more money". You tried to explain to me what he was saying. You said that life wasn't poetry but prose, that

it's about people who act instead of just contemplate, and when you said that your mouth was in action, your cheek bones were in motion, your hand gestured to me so I could internalize what you were saying. And when you undermine yourself, turning your own words into actions, your voice into movement, it is as if you had made a pact with me. And only now do I realize that you were both siding with me against my father and taking his side, and that's exactly where I was, and to me at that moment you were at your most beautiful, your very most.

I'm tired. I guess you're not ready yet.

So this is it, here's the update of the past year. A year with a lot of pitfalls. I finally found a use for my American passport and arrived in New York in the winter. It was Freezing cold. I was supposed to crash at a friend's, someone I knew from back home. I called her when I landed but she didn't answer, can you believe it? Eventually I went to some youth hostel in the Bronx, and the following morning, Jess, that's her name, called me back. She had gotten the date wrong by a day and was out of town, and what a shame we missed each other. That was my beginning here. But all that doesn't matter now.

Thanks for your offer to help. Funny, your phrasing sounds so American, so perfunctory. In any case, I can't write what this is about, not here, maybe over the phone, maybe not even that, and please don't bring it up again until I mention it myself. I have reasons to be afraid.

I care about you, Ella, the place where we connected is rooted inside me, and I'm still feeding off it. I'm writing this in the event you decide not to write anymore.

I wish you only happiness,

Itamar

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Itamar, I think it's time to set a few things straight. I'll try to make myself as clear as possible, and I hope the length of this email will be to your satisfaction.

I'll be very explicit in writing that I have never taken your hand in mine, nor have I offered my opinion about the size of any of your bodily organs, including your cock. That is such a distorted spin on what happened, it's as if we weren't even sitting in the same room. When you raised your concerns about the size and adequacy of said member, I told you I truly believe that men and women don't necessarily engage in technical measurements during an encounter. They meet. I said that I hope they attempt to experience the various levels and layers of their meeting in full, not in centimeters. You then responded with that far-fetched indicator you've now attributed to me, and I smiled at you and said it sounded a bit sad. How did you get from there to the heated, crude, disturbing recollection you described?

Utilizing this opportunity to its fullest, I would add that standing together in the bomb shelter was certainly a dramatic event for everyone concerned. I was under the impression we thoroughly addressed many aspects of it, including you meeting my two frightened daughters. You might recall I told my daughter that you will wait here with us, reassuring this shy and completely shaken little girl that I know you well. "Is he our friend?" she asked me quietly, and I nodded in encouragement, not grasping how strongly this particular gesture affected you.

Itamar, what will I ever do with you?

7

Dear Ella,

I thought it was possible, but I was mistaken, although I still don't exactly know where I got it wrong. One thing's for sure, we don't really understand each other, because if we did, something would have resonated. Which means, I guess, that I haven't seen you until now. I apologize.

I assumed that our sessions also created some kind of human connection that would enable us to talk like human beings. That's what I was trying to do, to initiate a normal conversation, not the kind we had either in your office or the "cave". It's hard to distinguish between the two. Maybe the difference lies in the tone, that thread that drives through the vocal cords, the neurons in the brain, and the feelings, and binds them all together. In our therapy talk, that thread was clear. In your office we explored how I felt, we examined what was happening and what it all means. The exploration itself was the primary objective, not you or me. In the kind of talk I wanted us to have, and I mean it, the goal was to connect our souls.

You remember the event differently. Maybe you didn't actually say anything about the size of my cock, and my memory of meeting the girls in the bomb shelter is inaccurate. But there was a crossing of boundaries there, and that's what I wanted you to address. Exploring the meaning of the "bomb shelter" in the context of therapy is interesting, even fascinating, certainly to you, but that wasn't my intention. I simply wanted to remind you

that the boundaries came undone, and if that be the case maybe there is a chance we can have a relationship outside our therapy as well. What happened is fairly simple – I asked, and you turned me down. That’s perfectly fine. And I have you to thank for that, for knowing how to deal with rejection. Do you remember when I wasn’t accepted to med school? you taught me that it doesn’t mean that I’m worthless and shouldn’t study at all. So a girl said, “You’re kidding, right?” when I worked up the nerve to ask for her phone number. That doesn’t mean there isn’t some other woman out there who will be attracted to me. You see, you taught me well. I can handle your rejection.

Or maybe I’m wrong and it’s not a rejection at all. Maybe all relationships start with a period of tearing down each other’s resistance. Each one takes his or her sledgehammer and starts gently breaking the other’s resistance. Oh but no, that’s not the right metaphor. Too violent. I’m going over what you wrote again. Your words are psychologically tainted, not only the probing tone but also your tactics to break through your patients’ resistance. You reveal a little and conceal twice as much, trying to seal the clinic off from the outside world, the patient sees you covering the windows with nylon sheeting, laying the blankets under the door, making it seem like a safe zone, and he lets his guard down, while yours is still up*.

Yes, you’re psycho-babbling again. It’s quite something, this osmosis. Like how someone who works with criminals becomes something of a criminal himself, or how someone who works with autism becomes a little autistic. Maybe that’s how it is with psychologists too, maybe they start penciling in meetings with

* A reference to the Gulf War in 1991, when Israeli citizens were instructed to seal windows and doors in response to potential chemical weapon attacks by Iraq. A common reference to being naive and easily misled.

friends, and then end these meetings on an uplifting, diplomatic note, as they do in their sessions with patients. Language affects the way they perceive reality. But they fail to take into account that this osmosis works both ways, and then they fall in love with the patient. But not you, Ella. You don't fall in love. Love is for other people.

Ella, I'm lost. There's no hope for me anymore. I've done something from which there's no going back, something that penetrates every vein and makes me loathe myself, and I already know that if my reservoirs of self-love can run out so fast, there's no chance I'll survive. But you - you have your whole life ahead of you. If only the language you've adopted doesn't slowly kill you. Finally, the heart will demand its due, and all the psycho-babble substitutions will no longer satisfy it, and it will give up.

Once again, I apologize.

Hugs,

Itamar

8

Itamar,

Your emails worry me a great deal. I can feel how hard you are trying to reach me, but your way of going about it is so bitter, and so tangled. I think there is something you don't fully comprehend, or perhaps you aren't even aware of; in my eyes, the meeting between us was a blessing, it truly was! It brought with it a kind of human warmth completely absent from our writing, a natural curiosity, such playfulness with words...

This doesn't happen in every therapeutic relationship, just as it doesn't always happen outside in the real world. But sometimes, just sometimes, the door opens and a patient with intelligent pondering eyes walks in, and I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that this journey will be significant.

Obviously, the journey is a turbulent one, but that's okay, more than okay, that's the meaning of an authentic encounter with another. Meeting the psyche in all its forms of expression—in its superfluity, as in its deficiency.

Itamar, what has happened to you since you left, and what hidden request lies in this correspondence? I feel we're on the verge of toppling into something that's off limits, and you were right to say that I had set these limits when

9

My last email was sent mid-sentence, unedited, and incomplete. I tried to finish it Saturday morning, when the girls were riding some wacky alpaca in the desert, but it got deleted from my phone. So now I don't really know what you read and what you didn't, and this slip of mine raised two thoughts.

The first is directly related to my distractions; I reminisced about some of your favorite moments in our sessions, the moments you felt had somehow evaded a strict regime whose rules you didn't fully understand. Always ready to catch a shred of a smile, a surprised expression, a sentence that went off on a tangent, an inappropriate giggle, and most desirable - an untimely knock on the door, maybe the air-conditioning repairman arriving too early? And through whom you could discover something crucial that must be exposed. Nothing got away from you. Not the book lying open on my desk, perhaps it resides beside my bed at night? Or a half-finished cup of coffee, or the smell at the entrance of the office, or a chapter published somewhere, once even a different shade of eyeshadow - all signs, clues, designed to uncover the "true" Ella. Not the fake one, who is always composed and guarded from you. Moments that "reveal a little and conceal twice as much", as you put it.

What a shame, since this entire time I've been willing and ready to meet you; it's like looking for breadcrumbs scattered under the table instead of enjoying the bountiful meal we ourselves have set before us.

And why am I writing this? Because these past few days have been a giant mess, which you would have no doubt taken great pleasure in. What you wrote about holding hands and measuring genitals was unnerving. I could have let the whole business of staying in the bomb shelter slide, since everyone there was rather anxious (even you, Mr. Itamar, who thanked each member of the squad that had launched the missiles), but I won't accept the delusion about holding hands and measuring genitals. It shows a complete inability to differentiate between fantasy and the reality of the encounter. And since this inability troubled me, and I was upset and distracted, you got to read my unfinished email and maybe also a few sentences sent from a smartphone undoubtedly too smart for me. Do you really think this is the only way, between wacky alpacas and overly sophisticated smartphones, you can truly meet me? Only through my blunders, my digressions, my failures, and confusion?

This leads me to the second thing I had on my mind today, and it has to do with what might be the greatest confusion of all – this writing project we're both engaged in, as if it's perfectly reasonable and obvious for a former patient and his psychologist to correspond with such a sense of confidence and fervor, without taking pause to contemplate the nature of this thing that's happening here – a thing you so obviously want to pursue outside therapy, whereas I clearly want it contained to the boundaries of the space in which we met. So come on, Itamar, you're scattering breadcrumbs, tossing around names of women, worrying me that you're already beyond hope... put your cards on our shared table. What has happened to you since you stopped coming in for therapy?

Ella

10

You were with the girls at an alpaca farm? Where? Down in the Negev? Such a cute place. On a family outing, one Saturday, I took my nieces and nephews for a hike from the hostel to the farm, and when we got there an alpaca spit on little Noa. I told you about her. She was in total shock, but later we couldn't stop laughing about it.

You went alone with the girls? I can barely handle these smart-phones myself. I've had so many embarrassing incidents sending texts to the wrong person, or the autocorrect completely changing the meaning of what I intended to say.

Reading your email, I laughed and cried at the same time. How incredibly conservative you are. How fearful. Maybe I've already crossed that thin line that distinguishes normal people from those who not only consider the social conventions to be ridiculous, but who are downright outlaws. And here you are, busy protecting your fine reputation. God forbid someone should find out a patient claimed you talked to him about his dick and accusations start flying, and before you know it, everything you've spent years building goes down the drain. So you solemnly clarify to your patient that it never happened, directing your words not to him but to the big brother who reads your emails. Funny. And sad. I remember I once wrote an email to someone who worked at a serious investment firm, something along the lines of "When will we sniff a couple of lines together again? I've got some great blow," and I accidentally sent it to her work address, which is regularly scanned by the company's security department. I instantly got

a phone call, and we drafted a reply together. She wrote: “Very funny, I’ve already told you, quit trying to talk me into it, it won’t work...” And I wrote back: “Okay, okay, I give up, my tactics don’t work on you...” And that way everyone calmed down. How funny. How sad. Just like your narcissism, which knows no bounds. You’re the center of attention at all times. It isn’t regular transference, to use you and your colleagues’ terms, it’s something more extreme with you, some kind of undocumented conditioning that happens to you the moment you enter the position. The unwritten rule that if somebody wants to be your patient, he has to agree that yours will be the dominant presence in the room. In that sense you remind me of Ruth, remember I told you about her? Ruth, who bound the love poems I wrote her and gave them to me as a birthday gift.

You’re right, I tried to reach you through the breadcrumbs, because they are your only real characteristics. Hoping that something in your sophisticated system of being present and absent at the same time would suddenly malfunction, allowing me to see the true Ella. You delude yourself by thinking that you’re conducting full, sincere encounters in the office – not just because it’s impossible to maintain so many full and meaningful relationships at the same time, but for the simple reason that most of the time, you’re not really there. Not as Ella. That’s why these hints, which, for a fleeting moment exposed a part of you like some virus in the software, were so dear to me. And yes, when I saw David Vogel’s *Married Life* on your desk, that exposure made me happy. There were times when we really met, I saw it in your eyes. Times when you understood me, and I you. It isn’t for nothing that the cock grows hard in such moments, it’s a testament to a real bridge being built.

The “writing project”, as you put it, is our life. Have you gone completely mad? If there’s one thing worth doing before the rope

tightens around my neck, it's to wake you up. Ring your doorbell again and again. Maybe you'll awaken and find that the shadows you see are people, not blurry elements in some architectural sketch you need to polish and perfect. What are we doing here? I try and I try to lure you into a relationship with me, and you refuse. Maybe I deserve it. I was so full of resistance walking into your office. Weeks of beating around the bush until I was finally able to bring my body and mind to sit in front of you. And maybe that's why it's all happening like this now. Maybe that's the price all psychologists pay when they're out there, in the world: their patients' resistance translates into their own resistance to meeting people. All the energy they spent tearing down their patients' defense mechanisms, for which they had to enlist their own crazy defense mechanisms, leaves a void that seeks fulfillment in the outside world. Am I right, Ella? You know I am.

These past few days have been so hectic over here that I haven't even noticed you sent two emails and not one. The words got blurred in a screen of fog, which isn't entirely unpleasant right now, with reality being difficult. Very difficult.

It goes like this: I need a loan of about twenty thousand shekels (6000 dollars). I need it right now. Or more like yesterday. This isn't why I renewed our relationship, please believe me. This isn't a matter of taking advantage. It's something that came up these past few days and has to do with the situation I'm in. With all your resistance I'm sure you'll say no. But since I'm desperate, I'm asking anyway. It's a loan I promise to repay. If not me then someone on my behalf will repay it, maybe my parents eventually, but I can't ask them now. If you say yes, I'll send you my bank account details. And if you say no, that's fine too, we'll continue talking here.

Itamar