



VINTAGE

# DON'T CALL IT NIGHT

AMOS OZ

# Contents

Cover  
About the Book  
About the Author  
Also by Amos Oz  
The Cast  
Title Page

Chapter 1  
Chapter 2  
Chapter 3  
Chapter 4  
Chapter 5  
Chapter 6  
Chapter 7  
Chapter 8  
Chapter 9  
Chapter 10  
Chapter 11  
Chapter 12  
Chapter 13  
Chapter 14  
Chapter 15  
Chapter 16  
Chapter 17  
Chapter 18  
Chapter 19  
Chapter 20  
Chapter 21  
Chapter 22  
Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Copyright

## About the Book

In the summer of 1989, at Tel-Kedar, a small settlement in the Negev Desert, the long time love affair between Theo, a sixty-year-old civil engineer, and Noa, a much younger school teacher, is slowly disintegrating. When a pupil of Noa's dies under difficult circumstances, the couple and the entire town are thrown into turmoil. Bestselling author Amos Oz explores with brilliant insight the limits and endless possibilities of love and tolerance and its effects on individual and community relationships.

## About the Author

Born in Jerusalem in 1939, Amos Oz is the internationally acclaimed author of many novels and essay collections, translated into thirty languages. His novels include *My Michael*, *Black Box*, *To Know a Woman*, *The Same Sea* and most recently *A Tale of Love and Darkness*. He has received several international awards, including the Prix Fémina, the Israel Prize and the Frankfurt Peace Prize. He lectures at the Ben Gurion University of the Negev. He is married with two daughters and a son, and lives in Arad, Israel.

Also by Amos Oz

Fiction

*My Michael*

*Elsewhere, Perhaps*

*Unto Death*

*The Hill of Evil Counsel*

*Touch the Water, Touch the Wind*

*Where the Jackals Howl*

*A Perfect Peace*

*Black Box*

*To Know a Woman*

*Fima*

*Panther in the Basement*

*The Same Sea*

*A Tale of Love and Darkness*

Non-Fiction

*In the Land of Israel*

*The Slopes of Lebanon*

*Under this Blazing Light*

*Israel, Palestine & Peace*

For Children

*Soumchi*

## *The Cast*

**Theo** (of Planning Ltd)

**Noa Dubnow** (teacher)

**Malachi** (Muki) **Peleg** (estate agent and investment consultant)

**Avraham Orvieto** (defence adviser or perhaps arms dealer)

**Erella Orvieto** (his wife)

**Immanuel Orvieto** (their son, former secondary school pupil)

**The Orvieto family's chimpanzee**

**Immanuel Orvieto's dog**

**Elazara Orvieto** (aunt and former bank clerk)

**Ron Arbel** (lawyer)

**Ludmir** (retired employee of the electricity company, member of many committees)

**Gusta Ludmir** (his wife, gives private maths coaching)

**Larlach Ludmir** (his granddaughter)

**Linda Danino** (clerk, divorced)

**Nehemia Dubnow** (retired employee of the water company)

**Chuma Zamosc Bat-Am** (militant vegetarian and pacifist)

**Yoshiahu (Yoshku) Zamosc** (born-again Jew)

**Peeping Gorovoy** (former champion weight-lifter of Lodz)

**Ezra Zussman** (poet) **and his wife**

**Batsheva Dinur** (the Mayor)

**Didi Dinur** (her husband killed in the Six Day War, apparently a musician)

**Batsheva's elderly mother** (retired teacher)

**Etam** (Batsheva's grandson)  
**Nawwaf** (who has brought olives from Galilee)  
**Julia and Dr Leo Dresdner, and Dr Nir** (the last two are dentists)  
**Dubi Weitzman** (notary and accountant)  
**Yehuda and Jakki** (Hollywood Photos)  
**Kushner** (bookbinder)  
**Schatzberg** (pharmacist)  
**Avram** (falafel seller, lately also shawarma in pitta)  
**Shlomo Benizri** (from the Department in Beersheba)  
**Doris** (Benizri's secretary)  
**Tikki** (a typist)  
**Podgy policeman** (from the road accident at Ashkelon junction)  
**Martha** (from Elat, apparently a drug user)  
**'Aatef** (a Bedouin tracker)  
**Alharizi** (formerly a house owner in Tel Kedar, now an importer of televisions in Netanya)  
**Natalia** (immigrant, a cleaner)  
**Her husband and his father** (immigrants, mechanics)  
**Gilboa** (newsagent and stationer)  
**Limor Gilboa** (assists her father, cellist)  
**Pini Bozo** (sells shoes)  
**His wife and baby** (killed)  
**Albert Yeshua** (the soldier who killed them)  
**Blind Lupo** (from the telephone exchange)  
**Anat and Ohad** (a young couple)  
**Bialkin** (sells furniture)  
**Gustav Marmorek** (alias old Elijah)  
**Violette and Madeleine** (hairdressers, sisters-in-law)  
**Hungarian cantor**  
**Paula Orlev** (Desert Chic Fashions)  
**Tal Orlev** (her daughter, between school and military service)  
**Jacques Ben Loulou** (Ben Elul's Garage)  
**Bargeloni Bros** (estate agents)



**Pini Finkel** (killed in the War of Independence)

**Nimrod Finkel** (his son, head of the Planning Agency)

**Cherniak, Refidim and Arbel, Lawyers** (90 Rothschild Boulevard, Tel Aviv)

**A professor and piano tuner** (writing a book entitled *The Essence of Judaism*)

**Amalia** (ailing librarian)

**Young man from Galway** (travelling around Galilee, looking for a girl named Daphne)

**String quartet** (immigrants from Kiev)

**Man crying in Jeep**

Amos Oz

DON'T CALL IT NIGHT

TRANSLATED FROM THE HEBREW BY  
Nicholas de Lange



AT SEVEN O'CLOCK in the evening, sitting on the balcony of his second-floor apartment, he is watching the departing day, and waiting. What does the last light promise, and what can it deliver?

Below lies an empty garden with a patch of lawn, some oleander bushes, a bench and a neglected bougainvillea bower. The garden ends in a stone wall marked with the outline of an opening which is blocked with courses of stones that are newer, lighter in colour – in fact, at this moment they even seem slightly lighter in weight than the original stones of the wall. Behind the wall rise two cypress trees. Now, in the evening light, he finds they look black rather than green. Beyond stretch barren hills. That way lies the desert, where, every now and again, a grey eddy whirls up, quivers for a moment, wriggles, sweeps away, subsides. Only to start up somewhere else.

The sky turns grey. There are some still clouds, one of which faintly reflects the glow of the sunset. The setting sun itself is not visible from this balcony. On the stone wall at the end of the garden a bird shrills excitedly, as though it has just discovered something that cannot be bottled up. How about you?

Night is falling. Around the town the street lights are coming on, and windows shine out between intervals of darkness. The strengthening wind carries a breath of campfires and dust. The moonlight casts a mask of death on the nearest hills, which are no longer hills but like the notes of a muffled tune. This place seems to him like the end of the world. He does not mind being at the end of the world. He has done what he can, and from now on he will wait.

He leaves the balcony, goes indoors, sits down, his bare legs on the coffee table, and his arms hanging down heavily on either side of the armchair as though being pulled towards the cool floor. He does not switch on the television, or the light. From down the street comes a whispering of car tyres, followed by the barking of a dog. Someone is playing a recorder, not a whole tune but simple scales repeated without any apparent variation. These sounds agree with him. In the bowels of the building the lift passes his floor without stopping. In a neighbouring apartment a woman's voice is reading the news on the radio, probably in a foreign language, though he is not certain of that right now. A man's voice on the stairs says, It's out of the question. Another replies, Okay then, so don't go, it'll come.

When the throbbing of the refrigerator stops, crickets can be heard in the wadi, as though punctuating the silence. A faint breeze rustles the curtains, ruffles the pages of a newspaper on a shelf, crosses the room, stirs the leaves of a houseplant, exits through the other window and returns to the desert. He momentarily hugs his shoulders. The pleasure reminds him of a summer evening in a real city, maybe Copenhagen, where he once stayed for a couple of days. Over there the night does not suddenly pounce, it feels its way gently. There the veil of twilight stretches for three or four hours, as though the evening aspires to reach out and touch the dawn. Various bells were ringing, one sounding hoarse, like a cough. A soft drizzle joined the evening sky to the water of the straits and the canals. An empty, brightly lit streetcar passed in the rain, and he thought he saw the young conductress leaning over in conversation with the driver, resting her hand on his, then the drizzle again, as if the evening light were not passing through it but coming from it, and the droplets met with the spray of a fountain in a small square, where the quiet water was illuminated from within all night long. A shabby

middle-aged drunk was sitting on the parapet dozing, his grey-bristled head sunk deep on his breast, and his feet, sockless in his shoes, immersed in the water, motionless.

What time is it now?

He peers in the dark at his watch, but as he looks at the luminous hands he forgets what the question was. Is this perhaps the beginning of the gradual decline from pain into sadness? Dogs start barking again, furiously this time, in backyards and empty lots, and from the direction of the wadi, and beyond, from the distant darkness, from the hills, Bedouin shepherd dogs and strays, perhaps scenting a fox, one bark subsiding into a whine and being answered by another, piercing, desperate, as though mourning an irreparable loss. This then is the desert on a summer night, ancient, impassive, glassy. Neither dead nor alive. Simply there.

Looking at the hills through the glazed balcony door and across the stone wall at the end of the garden, he feels a sense of gratitude, but for what he is not sure. Could he really be grateful to the hills? A man in his sixties, stockily built, with a broad, peasant face and a suspicious or doubtful expression with a hint of concealed cunning. He has close-cropped grey hair and a distinguished-looking brindled moustache. In any room he seems to occupy more space than his body really takes up. His left eye is almost always half-closed, not as though he were winking but as though he were staring fixedly at an insect or a tiny object. He sits wide awake yet limp, as if after deep sleep. He finds the calm connections between the desert and the darkness satisfying. Let others be busy this evening having fun, making arrangements, feeling regret: for his part he willingly endorses this moment, which does not seem empty. The desert seems right to him and the moonlight justified. In the window opposite, two or three stars glow sharply over the hills. Softly he declares: Now you can breathe.

IT'S ONLY IN the evening you can breathe a bit, when the heat lets up. Another crazy day is over. I've spent all my time just running after time. From eight o'clock till one forty-five, at school: two hours' general literature, two hours' matriculation revision, and an extra hour for Russian immigrant kids whose minds were definitely not on the Exile of the Godhead. A pretty girl called Ina or Nina said in a lesson about Bialik: His words are Biblical, the sentiment he took from Lermontov, the poesy is anachronistic. She went on to recite some lines of poetry in Russian, perhaps to demonstrate the sort of poetry she liked. I silenced her. Even though I was not entirely captivated with the subject and had difficulty restraining myself from saying that, as far as I was concerned, the Godhead could stay in exile.

During my break, at eleven fifteen, I sat down near the air conditioning in the reading room to prepare for my next lesson, but almost at once I was called to the Deputy Head's office for a meeting with a younger teacher who had taken umbrage at something an older one had said. I agreed to some extent with both of them and suggested they forgive and forget. It's a miracle how this kind of cliché, and especially words like forgive, provided they are used at the right moment and with impartiality, can make tears flow and bring about a truce. Such petty words can soothe the hurt, perhaps because it was petty words that caused it.

I skipped lunch and ate a falafel on the hoof to make a meeting at twelve fifteen at the Workers' Council office. We were going to try to stir up some sympathy for the idea of the refuge. The square was empty and sunscorched. In the

middle of the mangy bed of rosemary stood a podgy bespectacled immigrant with a black beret, leaning motionless on a hoe as though he had passed out. The sun above him was cloaked in a fiery haze. At four o'clock, an hour late, Avraham Orvieto's lawyer, Ron Arbel, arrived from Tel Aviv, a spoiled child whose mother had made him dress up as a businessman. We sat in the California Café with him and listened to a complicated explanation about the finances. By quarter to five, when I took him to meet the Town Treasurer, the perspiration had turned sticky and my armpits smelled sour like a strange woman's; from there to a consultation with Muki, who had promised to write a memorandum but hadn't, instead of which he spoke for half an hour about himself and what the government hadn't got the hang of. Across his T-shirt was a loud print of a new rock group called Devil's Tear. Then to the Education Centre and the chemist's in the square and I just made it to the supermarket a quarter of an hour before it closed, and managed to get some cash from the machine and collect the iron which was being repaired. It was dark when I got home, wiped out by the heat and exhaustion, and I found him sitting in an armchair in the living room, with no light on and no sound. Another sit-in to remind me that the cost of my activities is his loneliness. It's a ritual that has more or less fixed rules. I am, on principle, to blame for the difference of fifteen years in our ages. He, on principle, forgives me because he's such a thoughtful person.

He prepared supper on his own: You're tired, Noa, sit down, watch the news. He made an onion omelette, produced a geometrical salad, sliced some black bread and served it on a wooden board with some cheeses, and radishes that he had carved in the shape of rosebuds. Then he waited for my admiration as if he were Count Tolstoy who had once again deigned to light the stove in the hovel of one of his serfs.

After the news he put the kettle on, made us some herbal tea, placed a cushion under my head and another one under my feet and put a record on. Schubert. *Death and the Maiden*. But when I picked up the phone and rang Muki Peleg to ask if the memorandum was typed yet, and Ludmir and then Linda to sort out something to do with the planning permission, his generosity ran out and he got up, cleared and washed up the dishes, and shut himself up in his room, as though I were liable to chase after him. If it hadn't been for this demonstration I might have had a shower and gone to him, to tell him what had happened, ask his advice. On the other hand, I'm not sure I would have done. He's hard to take when he gets going - he knows exactly what's wrong with our project and what I should never have said to whom - and even harder when he says nothing and listens, trying not to let his attention wander, like a patient uncle who has decided to devote some precious moments to listening to a little girl explaining what it was that frightened her dolly.

At quarter past ten, after I had taken a cold shower and then a hot one, had collapsed on my bed and was trying to concentrate on a book about the symptoms of addiction, I half-heard from his room the sound of the BBC. The World Service. Recently, like Menachem Begin in his years of seclusion, he has taken to tuning in to London every night. Is he on the lookout for some item of news that they're keeping from us here? Or searching for a different perspective? Or using the broadcast to talk to himself? Maybe he's only trying to get to sleep. His insomnia infiltrates my sleep and robs me of the few dreams I might have had.

Later, groggy with tiredness, when I'd abandoned my glasses and the light and the book, I could still catch the underwater sound of his bare feet in the passage, no doubt on tiptoe so as not to disturb me, and the fridge opening and the tap running and the lights being systematically



switched off, and the apartment being locked up, his stealthy nocturnal wanderings that year after year have made me afraid a stranger has broken in. Some time after midnight I thought I sensed his touch on the door and I was so exhausted that I nearly submitted to his sadness and said yes, but he was already tiptoeing away down the passage - perhaps he had gone out onto the balcony without turning a light on. He likes the balcony on the summer nights. Or perhaps there was nothing, the footsteps, the touch on the door, his wall-piercing sadness, it may all have been mere fog, because I was already asleep. I had had a hard day and tomorrow after school there's another meeting at Muki Peleg's and I may have to go to Beersheba to try to finalize the planning permission at long last. I must get some sleep and try to be even more wide-awake tomorrow than I was today. Tomorrow is another hard day. And there's the heat. And the way time flies.

THIS TIME IT did not go straight past on the other side of the wall, up to the next floor, but stopped with a faint scratching sound, and at once slammed and continued on its way. Cold and silent, a gecko, stony-eyed in the darkness, watching a colourful insect fluttering in the light, that is how I receive her: the swish of her skirt, the electrical impulse of her will before she moves, then the motion itself, the rumour of her heels between the door of the lift and the door of the apartment the lock already turning: as always, with no fumbling, the key slips straight into the slot.

She went from room to room, talking in full spate, voice young and bright, abandoning the ends of her sentences, she crossed the apartment from one end to the other, turning on lights one after another in the hall, the kitchen, the toilet and above my head in the living room, wafting a trail of honeysuckle scent and setting up a row of electric lights in her path as though to illuminate the runway for her landing. The whole apartment screwed up its eyes, dazzled.

When she reached me she dropped her shopping basket and her briefcase and two overflowing plastic bags on the coffee table and asked: Why are you sitting in the dark, Theo? And she answered herself: You fell asleep again, sorry I woke you, actually you should thank me, otherwise how would you get to sleep tonight?

She bent over me and gave me a hasty comradely kiss on my hair, then removed my bare feet from the coffee table and made as if to sit down next to me, but no, she kicked off her shoes, whirled round in her light skirt with the blue pattern of diamonds, and flounced off to the

kitchen, came back with two tall glasses of mineral water saying, Dying of thirst, drank, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand in a childlike gesture and said, What's new? She leapt up again to switch on the TV and only then did she sit down for a moment on the arm of my chair, almost leaning on me but not really leaning, she pulled her blonde hair away from her eyes as though drawing back a curtain, and said, let me tell you what a crazy day I've had.

She stopped. She suddenly slapped her forehead and leaped away from me to the other armchair, saying, Sorry, Theo, just a minute, I must just sort out a couple of quick phone calls, do you feel like making a salad? I've had nothing to eat since this morning apart from a falafel, I'm starving, I'll only be a minute or two, then we'll talk. She pulled the telephone over onto the curve of her lap and held it there for an hour. While she was talking she wolfed down the supper I made and served her without noticing, alternating suggestions, feelings and snap judgments, munching the food only in the pauses when she permitted her interlocutors to defend themselves. I noticed that she said several times, Come off it, You're joking and also, What the hell, Come on, Don't make me laugh, and Great, Perfect, Grab it with both hands. Her hands are much older than the rest of her, her labourer's fingers wrinkled, the skin shrivelling, the back of her hand with its crisscrossed blue blood vessels and patches of pigment resembling a clod of earth. As if her true years have been temporarily driven back from her body to her hands, where they are patiently building up their reserves of decay in readiness for some weakening.

Then through the bathroom door for twenty minutes I could hear the jets of water and her young voice singing a song from years back, about a white rose and a red rose, followed by the sounds of the hairdryer and a drawer being opened. She eventually emerged scrubbed and scented, in a light blue cotton bath robe, and said, I'm whacked, I'm

knocked out, let's talk in the morning. She did not seem tired to me, but lithe and fetching, her thighs alive and breathing under the light bath robe, as she said, Good night, Theo, don't be angry, don't stay up late yourself. And again she said: What a crazy day I've had. And she closed the door behind her. She rustled the pages of a book in there for a few minutes and apparently she came across something amusing that made her laugh softly. A quarter of an hour later she switched the light off.

As usual she had forgotten to turn the shower tap right off. I could hear water running from where I was in the passage. I went and turned the tap as hard as I could, put the cap back on the toothpaste, turned the light off in the toilet, and went right round the apartment turning off the lights after her until there were none left on.

She has this gift of falling fast asleep in a moment. Like a popular little girl who has done her homework, tidied her desk, remembered to brush her hair and confidently believes that everything is all right and everybody is happy with her and tomorrow is another day. She is so much at peace with herself, with the darkness, with the desert at the end of the garden beyond the two thick cypresses, with the sheet that she has wound round her and the embroidered cushion that she clasps tightly to her chest in her deep sleep. Her sleep arouses a sense of injustice in me, or perhaps it is just plain jealousy; in the midst of the anger it is clear to me that there is no reason to be angry, but this knowledge does not quell my resentment and simply irritates me all the more.

I sat in my vest at the desk in my bedroom and tuned my transistor to London. Between news bulletins there was a programme about the life and loves of Alma Mahler. The presenter said that the male world was incapable of understanding her heart and saw in her a different character, not who she really was; then she began explaining what Alma Mahler was really like. I cut her off in

mid-sentence, to show her that the male world has not improved, and went barefoot to the kitchen to raid the fridge. I was only after a sip or two of cold water but the soft light inside the fridge ambushed me like a caress. So as not to lose it and be left in the dark I poured myself some cold wine and peeled a triangle of cheese and meanwhile I found that I was tidying up the shelves. I sniffed the open carton of milk a couple of times, suspicious both of the milk and of my own sense of smell. I dropped a cluster of sausages in the bin because their colour looked off. I drew up the yogurts in a rear line in order of date and closed up the ranks of the eggs in the plastic trays. I hesitated before a jar of tuna, but compromised by covering it in plastic film. I pulled down some bottles of juice from a cupboard and slotted them into the door of the fridge to plug some gaps in the line. I arranged an orderly display in the vegetable tray and again in the fruit basket. It was only with difficulty that I fought off the temptation to attack the freezer compartment. I advanced on tiptoe to the door of her bedroom: I'm here if I'm called for. If not, at least I can try to catch a whiff of her slumber; perhaps I will absorb some of her surplus sleep.

From there, to the balcony, and the faded, old-fashioned chair.

The night is almost transparent. The whole world is bathed in a cold silvery light. It is not breathing. The two cypress trees seem to be carved out of basalt. The moonlike mountains look swathed in lunar wax. Hazy creatures crouch here and there, and they too look moonlike. In the valleys there are shadows within shadows. There was a single cicada that I notice only when it stops. What did the men mistakenly see in Alma Mahler and what was she really? If an answer to this question was possible, I missed it. It is almost certain that the question is meaningless, that it is framed in an empty fashion, and that no answer is theoretically possible. The presence of the barren hills in

the darkness cancels words like “almost certain” or “theoretically possible”, and empties out the question, what did I see in you, Noa, or what do you see in me? I shall stop. Let’s suppose that you see in me what I sometimes see when I look at the desert. And how about me? Let’s say: a woman who is fifteen years younger than I am with a pulse like that at the core of life itself, a protoplasmic, rhythmic pulse, from before words or doubt existed in the world. Sometimes, without meaning to, she suddenly touches your heart. Like a cub, or a chick.

Years ago I learned to find my way around the map of the stars. It was something I learned in the army, or even earlier, in the youth movement. On clear nights I can still identify the Great Bear and the Little Bear and the Pole Star. As for the planets, I can still locate them but I forget which one is Jupiter, Venus or Mars. Right now in the total silence everything seems to have stopped and even the planets seem to have ground to a halt. It seems as though the night will go on for ever. All the stars look like tiny pinholes in the floor of the upper storey, droplets of luminosity from the light of the sky shining on the other side. If the curtain is drawn back, the world will be flooded with radiance and everything will become clear. Or be burned up.

There is a good telescope indoors, behind the bed linen on the second shelf on the left. I could go inside and get it so I can see better. Maybe Nehemia left her the telescope that used to belong to Peeping Gorovoy. Or to Yoshku, her cousin. There are still three or four such objects lurking around the house. The rest have gone. Disposed of. Even more spoiled than he was she once said during a row, even more of a Neanderthal male. She stopped short. She never repeated it. Even when we fight she keeps tight control of herself, and of me, her foot always firmly on the brake pedal. I am careful too, I know the limits: like touching glass with glass and drawing back just in time.