

# *The Suffering of Being Kafka*

*3<sup>rd</sup> EDITION*

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*The Suffering of  
Being Kafka*

**Short Fiction**

# A Beheaded Cart

by Sam Vaknin

Read the [Hebrew original](#).

*(In Hebrew, the word "Agala" means both cart and the feminine form of calf. A beheaded calf is among the sacrificial offerings enumerated in the Bible).*

My grandfather, cradling an infant's crib, departed. Navigating left and right, far along the pavement, he reached a concrete, round, post. There he rested, sheltered from the humid sun by peeling posters for lachrymose Turkish films. He pushed the crib outside the penumbral circle and waited.

Curious folks besieged the old man and his orphaned frame and then proceeded to buy from him the salted seeds and sweets that he lay, meticulously organised, inside the crib. My grandfather smiled at them through sea-blue eyes, as he wrapped the purchased sweetmeats in rustling brown paper bags.

My embarrassed uncles built for him a creaking wooden cart from remandered construction materials. They painted it green and mounted it on large, thin-tyred, wheels borrowed from an ancient pram. They attached to it a partitioned table-top confiscated from the greengrocer down the lane. Every morning, forehead wrinkled, my grandfather would fill the wooden compartments with various snacks and trinkets, at pains to separate them neatly. Black sunflower seeds, white pumpkin seeds, the salted and the sweet, tiny plastic toys bursting with candies, whistles, and rattles.

Still, he never gave up his crib, installing it on top of his squeaking vehicle, and filling it to its tattered brim with a rainbow of offerings. At night, he stowed it under the cart, locking it behind its two crumbling doors, among the unsold merchandise.

With sunrise, my grandfather would exit the house and head towards the miniature plot of garden adjoining it. He would cross the patch, stepping carefully on a pebbled path in its midst. Then, sighing but never stooping, he would drive his green trolley - a tall

and stout and handsome man, fair-skinned and sapphire-eyed. "A movie star" - they gasped behind his back. Day in and day out, he impelled his rickety pushcart to its concrete post, there dispensing to the children with a smile, a permanence till dusk. With sunset, he gathered his few goods, bolted the fledgling flaps, and pushed back home, a few steps away.

When he grew old, he added to his burden a stool with an attached umbrella, to shield him from the elements, and a greenish nylon sheet to protect his wares. He became a fixture in this town of my birth. His lime cart turned into a meeting spot - "by Pardo", they would say, secure in the knowledge that he would always be there, erect and gracious. Like two forces of nature, my grandpa and the concrete post - older than the fading movie posters - watched the town transformed, roads asphalted, children turn adults, bringing their off-spring to buy from him a stick of bitter black chewing gum.

Lone by his cart, he bid the dead farewell and greeted the newborn, himself aging and bending. Creases sprouted in his face, around his dimming sights, and in his white and delicate hands.

My grandfather had one love: my grandmother. A ravishing, proud, raven-haired woman. A framed retouched photo of her hung, imposing, on one of the walls. In it she stood, defiant, leaning on a carved pillar in a faraway place. This is how he must have seen her at first: a mysterious, sad-eyed disparity between dark and fair. Thus he fell in love and made her his only world.

This woman sat by his side, adjacent to his azure pushcart, day in and day out. She said nothing and he remained mute. They just stared with vacuous eyes, perhaps away, perhaps inside, perhaps back, to previous abodes in bustling cities.

At first, she seemed to like being his sidekick, confidently doling confectionery to toddlers, whose mothers remained forever infants in her memory. Intermittently, she laid a shrivelled hand on his venous knee, leaving it there for a split, fluttering, second, conveying warmth and withdrawing as unobtrusively. It was enough to restore him to his full stature. But then, the municipal workers came and pasted funereal announcements onto his concrete pole and the magic was all but gone.

My grandma withered, dilapidated by this onerous existence. Eveningtime, she would get up and carry her stool afore, clenched in two twiggy hands, tediously dragging her reluctant self on the long march home. My grandfather observed her, his eyes a moist, eroding guilt. His disintegrating pushcart, the rain-drenched figure of his loved one, the whizzing torment of the desert winds, the

sound of the crackling paper bags in her arthritic palms - they all conspired to deny him his erstwhile memory of her.

Each morning, my grandfather woke up to study this ageless image as he glided over her translucent skin, high-arching cheeks, and sleep-fluttery eyelashes. He fended off the intrusions of the world as he smoothed the covers and tucked her figure in. Then, he would get up and make her breakfast, arranging ceremoniously her medicines in multicoloured plastic containers on the tray.

But my grandma rejected his sunup pleas. She wouldn't go on living. One silent morning, she clung to her sheets and wouldn't rise and accompany him. That day, grey and defeated, my grandpa ploughed the pavement with his barrow, unfolded a worn deck chair, and sank in, awaiting my grandmother's reappearance.

When she did not materialise, he left his post much earlier than usual. He emptied the compartments dutifully, packed the unsold goods in large canvas sacks, tidying them away behind the two bottom doors of his cart. He then unfurled a polyester sheet above it and sailed home, shoving and cajoling his screeching and scraping workstation.

My grandma was in bed, as he had left her, ensconced in blankets, a suicidal tortoise, glaring at the ceiling as it bled in aqueous abstracts. My grandfather parked his rusting, faded, wagon and climbed home. His wife awoke with startled whimpers, tears streaming silently down her creviced face, tearing his heart with the iron grip of festering love. He hugged her and showered her with panicky little kisses.

She froze and fortified her berth with pillows piled high, staring at him through narrow cracks of oozing sanity.

One day, my grandpa, returning in the evening, left his cart outside, uncharacteristically. He entered and, for a few minutes, he and my grandmother just watched each other wearily. He extended a calloused hand and she dreamily stood up and escorted him to their porch, which overlooked the weed-grown garden.

My grandfather draped her shoulders with a knitted woollen shawl. He tightened it, and then, her shivering hand in his, he sat his love among some cushions he prepared. She glanced aimlessly at a guava tree that shot among the trail of gravelled stones. My grandfather contemplated her awhile and then, with sudden resoluteness, left.

Seconds later he reappeared among the shrubs, saluted her with a sledgehammer he held tenuously with both hands. She strained her face, attentive, consuming his image, like a flower would the sun, or the blind do the sounds.



Gasping and panting, my grandpa heaved the pushcart to the centre of the plot. With repeated, furious, blows, he dislocated its wheels and doors. Reduced to splintered wood and twisted metal, he cocooned it in the nylon throw and left it, devastated by the trees.

Sitting beside, they watched the setting sun diffracted from the green-hued sculpture in the garden. A smile budded in my grandma's honeyed eyes and spread into my grandfather's deep blue gaze.

The cart stood there for years, disintegrating inexorably beneath its blackening shield. Its wheels, now rooted in the soil, it sank into the mildewed ground, another, peculiarly shaped sapling. My grandpa never adjusted the synthetic sheet that swathed it, nor did he dig out the burgeoning wheels.

My grandpa was visiting a pharmacy, replenishing her medications, when my grandma died. With the dignity of the indigent, he never bargained, never raised his voice. Packed in small, white, paper bags, he rushed the doses to his wife, limping and winded.

This time the house was shuttered doors and windows. My grandma wouldn't respond to his increasingly desperate entreaties. He flung himself against the entrance and found her sprawled on the floor, her bloodied mouth ajar. As she fell, she must have hit her head against the corner of a table. She was baking my grandfather his favourite pastries.

Her eyes were shut. My grandpa knew she died. He placed her remedies on the floured and oiled table and changed into his best attire. Kneeling beside her, he gently wiped clean my grandma's hands and mouth and head and clothed her in her outdoors coat.

His business done, he lay besides her and, hugging her frail remains, he shut his eyes.

My uncles and aunts found them, lying like that, embraced.

My grandparents' tiny home was government property and was reclaimed. The sanitary engineers, revolted, removed from the garden the worm-infested, rotting relic and the putrid sheet concealing it.

The next day, it was hauled by sturdy garbage collectors into a truck and, with assorted other junk, incinerated.

[Return](#)

# Language of Black and Red

by Sam Vaknin

Eli and I sit on ladder-backs next to a luxurious roulette in a casino in Spain. I can almost pick glitters from the heavy, lowered chandeliers. I can practically touch the shiny wooden wheel. I can see the croupier's manicured nails. Lithe young bellhops, clad in ornamental uniforms, place trays on gypsum pillars next to our chairs. We fervently gulp the champagne from the tall, prismatic glasses and nibble at the tiny sandwiches.

We are that lucky that we dare not leave the table, not even to relieve ourselves.

Piles of shiny square chips represent our exceptional streak of winnings. The table supervisor looks very anxious. He shifts restlessly on his elevated seat, hawk-eyeing everyone malevolently. Sure enough, he doesn't like us. He clears all other players, letting us bet in splendid isolation, facing each other.

Eli's upper lip and temples glisten. My armpits ooze the acrid smell of manly perspiration. Easy to tell we are tense or apprehensive or both. We evade each other's gaze. Our hands are shaking and the boys keep pumping us with increasingly inebriating drinks. They want us under the influence. They want us to cough up everything we have and then some. We want to win. We want the casino broke. Our differences are profoundly irreconcilable.

Eli is a quarter of a tough century my senior. His life-swept face is haggard, straggly and raven eyebrows, lips cruel and eyes chillingly penetrating. He finds his sense of humour irresistible. It often is.

My baby face is framed by the plastic quadrangles of my glasses. I broadcast innocence and guile. The reactions I provoke are mixed. Some sense my vulnerability and hasten to protect me. Others find my haughty slyness loathsome. I guess I conjure my defencelessness to con my victims.

It may prove unhealthy to lose our sponsors' money. These people are charm itself and sheer delight - until you breach their pockets. They tend to lose their fabled equanimity. They regard

business losses as hostile acts and the perpetrators as lethal enemies. So, they strike first, giving you no chance to err, to apologise, to scrutinise.

We are piling on not be piled in. The dough is multiplying. What if we lose? Eli says he has this thing going for him tonight, a wild card, from nature, and he does not dream to stop even though we reek of the casino's funds, even though two Spanish beauties resolutely scramble over him and heavies in bursting suits forage around obtrusively.

Eli's protruding eyes fixated on the wheel, mesmerically attempting to bring it to a favoured halt.

It smoothly winds down and Eli ignores my furious pestering: our underwriters invested to test and implement a betting method I developed. "I am offended" - I whisper, he ignores me. A febrile Eli has bonded with the table and every number wins, especially his choices.

"Twenty eight!" - he hisses, sidestepping the croupier to fetch his gains. He sprawls on the green felt surface and lovingly enfolds the clacking tokens. Reclining, eyes shut agloat, he savours his unaccustomed fortune. For he deserves a break. To Eli, this is not a game or, as I regard it, merely another path to self-enrichment.

To him, it is a sweet revenge for all the years he wasted, vending decaying fruits, along dusty and sizzling highways. This loot proves his detractors wrong. It loudly states, in black and red: I am here, not to be snubbed.

"Let's play some baccarat" - he sneers - "I am tired of this game."

We stretch our limbs and Eli surveys the killing fields we leave behind. He tremulously stacks the chips on one another, by size and then by colour. We carry them with trepidation all the way to the cashier and convert them to pesetas. Eli halves the tottering mound. He entreats me to deposit one of the two resulting heaps in the strongbox in our room.

He pleadingly commands me:

"No matter how much I beg and threaten, order or cajole - do not be tempted to obey me. Do not bring down this money."

I eagerly acquiesce.

"And now" - he rubs his hands - "Let's fry this fish in its own fat. Let's use some of the profits to dine in the casino's restaurant. Do you know that eateries in gambling dens are the best in the world?"

I don't. It is my first trip away from Israel. But he is right, the food is mouth-watering. A gypsy band of violins plays in the background.

Now, cleaned out gamblers alight by our burdened table and pat Eli's upright back. They greet him eagerly, as though, through him, they humble the much unloved establishment. They questioningly glance at me, a cold appraising look. They recount how they turned pros and swap the numbers of their rooms in the hotel above the gaming halls.

They sound content but look harassed and wiry. Involuntary ticks ravage their hands and faces. They all sport golden rings, red necks enchained with chokers. Their eyes dart restively. They sound as though they are listening and nod their heads in places, right and wrong - but they are distant. Minute or two of pleasantries and off they go to haunt another patron.

The dinner over, Eli fires up a black cigar and sighs. He casts an ominous stare at me for daring to suggest we call it a day.

"Don't be a jinx!" - he rasps - "You don't retire on a night like this with Lady Luck herself in partnership. These are the kind of early hours that casinos fear, I tell you" - and he goes on to rattle off the names of acquaintances turned millionaires. The next day they reverted, he ruefully admits. "Too greedy" - is his verdict - "Didn't know when to stand up."

Now that we've won, can we try out my method?

He snorts.

"It puts me to sleep, your martingale" - he grunts - "Its slowness drives me to distraction. I came here to enjoy myself, not just to profit. If you insist, here is some cash. Go, play your darned system. Just do me a favour, stray to another table."

Eli, returning to our first roulette, is greeted with regal pomp. I wander to a further board with lower minimum wagers. I squash my way into a raucous mob. They screech and squeal with every spin. I place some of my meager funds on red. Despite the tiny sum and nearly equal chances - I waver nauseous and scared. Until the ball reposes and the croupier announces black. Twenty eight.

I lost.

Another dose on red, just slightly larger. Another anxious wait while the croupier employs a silver rake to place the bets. I sneak a peek at Eli's table. It's hard to tell his state. His body tilts in zealous inclination, his shaded eyes impale the imperturbable dealer, his twitchy hands engulf the cards doled out from the "shoe". It's "21" or Blackjack, a pretty basic card game.

On certain rounds, Eli presents his palm, two of its fingers pointing at the "shoe". The dealer acknowledges him discreetly and draws the cards. He lays them gingerly in front of Eli who,

exultant, gathers his winnings and tips the grateful worker. I can relax.

My tiny gains accumulate. The hours pass, the tables empty, it's only I and the croupier. My capital is nearly doubled. Eli, his countenance spent, keeps gambling. His bobbing head recoils as he awakes from interrupted slumber. It's just the two of us against the weary staff.

As autumn night is pierced by moonlight, the practiced smiles are lifted, wiped is the feigned civility of all involved. Players and house alike frantically observe each card, each turn of the wheel, the rested ball, the flickering digits of the stressed croupier. We shut our bloodshot eyes between one twirl and another, in intervals when cards aren't dealt and profits aren't paid.

Fatigue-glued to my chair I find it hard to stoop and place the wagers on the fluctuating squares of the roulette board. Eli wobbles towards me, his loosened tie dangling on his much-stained shirt. He undoes the upper buttons and slumps onto a lounge.

The presence of his silence compels me to skip the coming spin. I half turn towards him, rubbing my eyes with sticky hand. We stare at the tarnished carpet until he mutters:

"I am left with nothing."

And then:

"Go get the money from the safe."

But then he had instructed me to ignore such orders. Using my method, I have doubled our funds and more while Eli lost all our money overnight. I feel wrath-struck. I want to grab him by his tainted collar and shake him till it hurts. Instead, I rise, my legs a wobbly and oedematous mass. I stumble hesitantly until the pains subside and I can properly walk, toes hard on heels, to the elevator bank.

When I am back, Eli is slouched, position same, and snores. I could refrain from rousing him, say that I fell asleep in our room, that I lost the key to the safety deposit box, that I stirred him up but he wouldn't budge, I could come up with anything I damn well please, now that he is sound asleep - he will thank me for it, he will want to believe me. It is our last chance.

I regard the rustling plastic bag. I feel the greenish notes inside. Then I jiggle Eli's shoulder. He comes to in panic, surveying the alien landscape. Then, mechanically, he snatches our neatly packed reserve and falters towards his table.

I bide the time to his return, eyes glazed, lips forced into a tortuous smile.

"It's over" - he mumbles - "let's get out of here."

I collect my winnings from the board and proudly display them. He snickers:

"Less than my losses in every minute of this cursed evening."

But that is all we have. We pack our meager belongings and sneak through the back door to the taxi at the head of a nocturnal queue. Eli sprawls across the upholstered back seat for a quick shut-eye. I give the driver the name of our hotel at the heart of Madrid and he embarks on the twisting byways of the mountain slope.

Midway, Eli stops the cab and throws up through the semi lowered pane. The irate cabby refuses to proceed. He points to an antiquated manual meter and demands his fee. I pay him and with emphatic whoosh he vanishes behind a gloomy curve.

Eli and I, left crouching on a foreign hillside, far from any settlement, the night a velvet murk. Eli ascends the road, takes me in tow, two Chaplinesque figures in bargain-basement suits and fluttering cravats. The hours pass and we are no closer to our destination. A rising sun daubs us with pink and wine.

Eli turns to me and vows:

"From now on we play only with your system, Shmuel, I swear to you, only your martingale."

I don't respond. I distrust Eli's ability to keep his promises. This pledge came unsolicited and useless.

Eli drags his feet laboriously, wipes tears from reddened eyes and moans:

"Only your way, I guarantee, never again just gambling wildly. We wager on your brain and win, we win a lot, I'm talking millions. We won't know what to do with it, I'm telling you. After all, how many steaks can one consume? With mushrooming gains, we will occupy the best hotels and bang the greatest stunners, and wear the chicest clothes..."

There is such yearning in his voice. I embrace him warmly and I say:

"Sure thing, Eli, it's bound to happen. You and I, and screw the world. What you have just described is only the beginning. Just stick to my gambling system and it will turn out fine. Casinos everywhere will fear us like the plague..."

"The plague" - Eli reiterates and we stand, cuddled, two silhouettes carved against the inexorably rising day.

[Return](#)

# On the Bus to Town

by Sam Vaknin

Read the [Hebrew original](#).

I must catch the city-bound bus. I have to change at the Central Station and travel a short distance, just a few more minutes, to jail. The prison walls, to the left, will shimmer muddy yellow, barbed wire fence enclosing empty watchtowers, the drizzle-induced swamp a collage of virile footsteps. I am afraid to cross its ambiguous solidity, the shallow-looking depths. After that I have to purge my tattered sneakers with branches and stones wrenched out of the mucky soil around our barracks.

But there is still way to go.

I mount the bus and sit near a dishevelled, unshaven man. His abraded pair of horn-rimmed glasses is adjoined to his prominent nose with a brown adhesive. He reeks of stale sweat and keeps pondering the clouded surface of his crumbling watch. His pinkie sports a rectangular, engraved ring of golden imitation.

The bus exudes the steamy vapours of a mobile rain forest. People cram into the passages, dragging nylon-roped shopping bags, shrieking children, and their own perspiring carcasses, their armpits and groins stark dark discolorations.

All spots are taken. Their occupants press claret noses onto the grimy windows and rhythmically wipe the condensation. They explicitly ignore the crowd and the censoring, expectant stares of older passengers. As the interminable road unwinds, they restlessly realign their bodies, attuned to seats and neighbours.

Our driver deftly skirts the terminal's piers and ramps. Between two rows of houses shrouded in grimy washing, he hastens towards the freeway. He turns the radio volume up and speakers inundate us with tunes from the Levant. Some travellers squirm but no one asks to turn it down. It is the hourly news edition soon. Thoughts wander, gaze introspectively inverted, necks stretch to glimpse the passing views.

The broadcast screeches to a sickening but familiar halt. Faint cries, the Doppler wail of sirens, air surgically hacked by chopper

rotor blades, the voices of authorities grating with shock and panic. The disembodied speech of spluttering witnesses. On site reporters at a loss for words record mere moans and keens. An orgy of smoking flesh.

The breaking news has cast us all in moulds of frozen dread and grief. Here burly finger poking nose, there basket petrified in midair haul, my neighbour absentmindedly rotates his hefty ring.

The announcer warns of imminent terrorist attacks on public transport. It recommends to err on the side of caution and to exhaustively inspect fellow commuters. Trust no one - exhorts a representative of the law - be on alert, examine suspect objects, call on your driver if in doubt. Pay heed to dubious characters and odd behaviours.

Our bus is trapped in a honking row of cars, under a seething sun. The baking asphalt mirrors. I am anxious not to be delayed. The wardens warned us: "Never be late. Make no excuses. Even if God himself comes down - be back on time." Latecomers lose all privileges and are removed to maximum security in Beersheba.

I debate the fine points with myself: is mass slaughter ample reason for being tardy or merely an excuse? No force is more majeure than prison guards. I smile at that and the tension plexus slackens.

A febrile thought:

Jailers are ultra right-wing and rabid nationalists. Terrorism must never be allowed to interfere with the mundane, they say. And I rehearse in hopeful genuflection: "You mustn't send a Jewish prisoner to an Arab-infested prison. After all, I was held up by Arab assassins who slaughtered Jews!"

The legalistic side (they are big on it in penal institutions):

How can I prove my whereabouts (on this bus) throughout the carnage? Think alibi. The inmate always shows that he has complied, the warden equally assumes he is being conned, but even he must prove it. A stalking game with predators and prey, but ever shifting roles.

I rise, prying my neighbour loose from contemplation. He eyes me, wicked. I pass a soiled boot above his clustered knees and place it gingerly between two bursting bags. Moustachioed women wipe milky exudation from upper lips with blotted synthetic handkerchiefs. They address me in a foreign, gravelling, language. They use elephantine, venous, legs to push aside their luggage - a gesture of goodwill more than a decongesting measure.

I feel the clammy, throbbing breathing of another on my trousers. Thrusting my other leg, I straddle the passage, two



Herculean pillars, a sea of Mediterranean groceries between my calves. Toe by heel, I get nearer to the stuporous driver, a human ripple in my wake.

"I am a prisoner" - I inform his beefy neck.

His muscles tense but he does not respond or turn to scrutinise me.

"I am an inmate" - I repeat - "Can you please confirm by writing in this diary (I point at a grey notepad I am holding) that I was on your bus at this hour? I have no pen" - I add.

He casts a sideways glance at me, monitoring the hopeless traffic jam from the corner of a bloodshot eye.

(Emphatically):

"So, you are a prisoner? What could you have you done?" (you chalky, myopic, intellectual).

Right behind him, a woman past her prime, face coated, breasts nestled in a pointed bra. The driver cannot keep his eyes off them. She, on her part, seems to be fixated on his tensile musculature. They both start at the sound of my voice:

"Banks."

"Banks!" - the driver mirthfully slaps his bulging thighs and the woman chuckles throatily, lips peeled to reveal pink-tainted teeth. "Come over here, I'll sign it."

In one untrammelled motion, he removes a hirsute hand from the oversized steering wheel, takes hold of my jotter, and opens it. Off goes his second hand. He scribbles laboriously, tongue perched on fleshy lips, ending with a flourishing signature.

People are murmuring throughout the bus. My answer is equivocal. It could imply armed robbery - or fraud - or counterfeit. I may be violent. The innocent looking are the really dangerous. I may even be an Arab, impossible to tell them apart nowadays.

A web of mutters spins from crimson lips to hairy ears, from crumb-strewn mouths to avid auricles. I return to my seat, retracing my erstwhile progress, facing the hydra. With the pad in my back pocket, I am calmer. Que serra, serra.

At the edge of my awareness a shrill, self-righteous female voice:

"Get out now, or I am calling the police."

I open my eyes, trying to pinpoint the mayhem. Somewhat behind me, the altercation draws closer, a portly woman pushing aside strap-holding passengers. She is preceded by a far younger female scrambling, expression hunted, to flee the bully.

She passes me by, her coarse contours defaced by agony, wheezing through luscious lips, one hand supporting heavy bust,

the other clutching a sheaf of papers densely written in calligraphic Arabic.

"Driver" - the mob exclaims - "There is an Arab on board!"

"Go down! I am not sharing a bus with a terrorist!" - a woman screams and then another: "Maybe she is dangerous? Did you frisk her when she boarded?"

The driver negotiates the dense circulation, manoeuvring among a fleet of barely visible compacts. The noise distracts him. Without braking, he turns around and enquires: "What is it? What's the matter?"

"There's an Arab woman here" - one volunteers to edify him - "She is aboard the bus and may have explosives strapped around her waist." "Get her off this vehicle, she may be lethal!" - another advises.

"I am not forcing anybody down who has paid the ticket!" - snaps the driver and reverts to the hazy windshield.

A stunned silence. They thought the driver was one of them, he doesn't appear to be a peacenik. Someone latches on to the frontal paned partition and expostulates. "It's not reasonable, your decision. Today, you never know. Even their women are into killing, I saw it with my own eyes in Lebanon. They explode themselves like nothing, not a problem..."

The woman who spotted the ostensible terrorist now badgers the driver:

"Give me your details. I am going to have a chat with your supervisors. You can forget about this cosy job of yours!"

The Arab stands mute, vigilantly monitoring the commotion. A passenger tilts and hisses in her ear: "Child murderer." She recoils from the gathering nightmare and bellows, addressing the jam-packed bus:

"I am a nurse. I tend to the sick and frail all day long, both ours and yours. Every day there's a flood of casualties. Our injured. Our corpses. Your injured. Your corpses. Children, women, shreds, all full of blood..." - She pauses - "Why do you treat me this way?"

Her Hebrew is rocky but sufficient to provoke a heated debate with supporters and detractors.

"What do you want with this woman? She is just an innocent commuter! Look at yourselves! You should be ashamed!"

Others are genuinely scared. I can see it on their faces, the white-knuckled way they cling to the metal railings opposite their seats, the evasive looks, the stooping shoulders, eyes buried in the filthy flooring.

She may well be a terrorist, who knows?

It is too late to smother this burgeoning conflagration. My neighbour exchanges heavy-accented verbal blows with someone behind us. Women accuse each other of hypocrisy and barbarism.

The driver, pretending to ignore us, head slanted, listens in and steals appreciative glances at his voluptuous fawner. To garner his further admiration, she plunges into the dispute, a brimstone diva with words of fire.

Some passengers begin to push the Arab and shove her with innocuous gestures of their sweaty palms. They endeavour to avoid her startled gaze. She tries again:

"What kind of people are you? I am a medical nurse, I am telling you. So what if I am Arab, is it automatic proof that I am a terrorist?"

My neighbour suddenly addresses me:

"You've got nothing to say?"

"To my mind, if she were a terrorist, she would have blown us all to kingdom come by now."

I let the impact of this sane reminder settle.

"This bus is bursting. The driver skipped a few stations on the way" - I remind them - "She is smack amidst us. She has no bags. She could have detonated herself and demolished us by now."

My neighbour slaps his thighs with furry hands, a sign of pleasure. I am on his side. Some voices crow, encouraging me to proceed: "Let him continue, go on."

But I have got nothing more to add and I grow silent.

The Arab scrutinises me doubtfully, not sure if she understood correctly. Do I suspect her of being a terrorist or don't I?

"And who might you be to tell us off, if I may?" - scoffs the woman who started it all. Her voice is screaming hoarse, her face aflame with stripes of lipstick smeared and make up oozing. Three golden bracelets clang the rhythm of her scornful question.

"He is a prisoner" - announces the driver's would-be floozy. She eyes both me and her desired conquest triumphantly. The driver studies her in his overhead mirror, then gives a haunted look. Control is lost. He knows it.

"An inmate" - shrieks the agitator for all the bus to hear - "The perfect couple! A felon and an Arab! Perhaps you are an Arab too?"

"I am not an Arab" - I respond calmly - "They are too well mannered for the likes of me and you."

She blows up:

"Son of a bitch, maniac, look who's talking!" - She leans towards me and scratches my face with broken, patchily varnished nails -

"A prisoner piece of shit and whoring stench of an Arab stink up this bus!"

My neighbour half rises from our common seat, grabs her extended arm and affixes it firmly behind her back. She screams to her dumbfounded audience: "They are together in it, this entire group, and they are a menace. Driver, stop this instant, I want the police, now!"

I do not react. It was foolish of me to have partaken in this tiff in the first place. Prisoners involved in incidents of public unrest end up spending a week or more in the nearest squalid detention centre, away from the relative safety of the penitentiary. Anything can happen in these infernos of perspiring, drug-addicted flesh, those killing fields of haemorrhaging syringes, those purgatories of squeals and whimpers and shaking of the bars, draped tight in sooty air.

I spent a month in these conditions and was about to return, I feel convinced.

The driver brakes the bus, rises, and gestures to the Arab helplessly. She tries to extricate herself by moving towards his cubicle. Some women mesh their hands, trapping her flapping arms, flailing about, her cheeks lattices of translucent rivulets. Her fear is audible in shallow exhalations.

But her captors persevere. They clench her scarf and the trimmings of her coat and twist them around the Arab's breathless neck.

The driver disembarks through the pneumatically susurrating doors. He walks the gravel path adjacent to the highway, desperately trying to wave down a passing car. Someone finally stops and they have a hushed exchange through a barricaded window. The hatchback cruises away.

The driver hesitates, his eyes glued to the receding vehicle. He contemplates the hostile bus with dread and climbs aboard. He sinks into his seat and sighs.

A patrol car arrives a few minutes later and disgorges two policemen. One elderly, stout and stilted, his face a venous spasm. He keeps feeling the worn butt of his undersized revolver. The other cop does the talking. He is lithe, a youth in camouflage, penumbral moustache, anorectic, sinewy hands, his eyes an adulterated cyan. He swells his chest and draws back his bony shoulders, attempting to conceal his meagreness.

"What's going on here?" - his voice a shocking bass. We are silenced by the contrast.

The instigator of the turmoil clears a path and fingers his oversized tunic as she volunteers:

"She is a terrorist and he is a convict and they were both planning to blow this bus up."

"Twaddle!" - roars my neighbour - "She is a hysterical, psychotic, panicky woman! Look what she did to his face!" - he points at me - "And that one, over there" - he singles the Arab out with a nail-bitten pinkie - "her only sin is that she is an Arab, a nurse or something, a fellow traveller, paid her ticket like all of us." The driver nods his assent.

"I am telling you..." - the stirrer yelps but the officer is terse:

"Continue behaving like this, lady, and it is you I will arrest for disturbing the peace..."

"Another mock cop" - she slurs, but her voice is hushed and hesitant.

"Perhaps even insulting a police officer on duty?" - the policeman hints and she is pacified, retreating, crablike, eyes downcast, towards her shopping.

"Who is the prisoner?" - the veteran cop enquires, his paw atop his gun, caressing it incessantly. I raise my hand.

"You are coming with us. The rest continue to your destinations. You too!" - he addresses the Arab, his civility offensively overstated.

"I want no problems here!" - he warns - "It's Friday, the Sabbath is upon us. Go home in peace. The police has more important things to do than to resolve your petty squabbles!"

Extracted from my window seat, their fingers vicelike under both armpits, they half drag me across my neighbour's knees, strewing all over him the contents of the plastic bag in which I keep my wallet and the weekend papers. It hurts.

We alight and the young one taps the folding exit doors. The bus drones its way into the snaring traffic jam. I watch its back as it recedes. The coppers place a pair of shiny handcuffs on my wrists and shackle my ankles too. I stumble towards the waiting squad car. They unlock the rear and gesture me to enter. They push me from behind and bolt the door. The gory rays of a setting sun dissect the murk inside.

I see the officers' backs and necks as they occupy the front seats beyond the meshed partition. One of them half turns and spits a snarl:

"My partner loves you, Arabs."

Only then, my eyes having adjusted, I notice the others in the stifling cabin I inhabit. They rattle their manacles and smile at me wolfishly, a toothy apparition.

"Where are you from, handsome?" - one asks and moves to flank me. His mitt is motionless on my knee.

He has an Arab accent.

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# The Butterflies are Laughing

by Sam Vaknin

My parents' home, it is dusk time, and I am climbing to the attic. I settle on my childhood's sofa, whose unravelled corners reveal its faded and lumpy stuffing. The wooden armrests are dark and bear the scratchy marks of little hands. I contemplate these blemishes, set bright against the deep, brown planks, and am reminded of my past. A light ray meanders diagonally across the carpet. The air is Flemish. The fitting light, the shades, the atmosphere.

There is a watercolour on an easel of a thickset forest with towering and murky trees. A carriage frozen in a clearing, a burly driver, looking towards nowhere, as though there's nothing left to see. No light, no shadows, just a black-singed mass of foliage and an incandescent, sallow horse.

My little brother lies bleeding on the rug. Two gory rivulets, two injured wrists, delineate a perfect circle. They cross his ashen palms and waxen, twitching fingers. It may be a call for help but I have been hard of hearing.

I crouch beside him and inspect the wounds. They are shallow but profuse. Red pain has broken past his skin, his face is wrinkled. I wipe him gently, trying not to hurt.

He stares at me, eyes of a gammy colt awaiting the delivering shot. He radiates the kind of gloom that spans the room and makes me giddy. I cower to my heels, then squat beside him, caressing his silent scream. My palms are warm.

We while the time. His frothy exhalations, my measured air inhaled, our lungs entwined in the proliferating density. The volumes of my childhood mob the shelves, their bindings blue and rigid.

I look at him and tell him it's alright, he shouldn't worry. A mere nineteen, he gives me a senescent smile and nods in frailty. He grasps it all, too much. Shortly, I may have to lift him in my arms and set him on the couch. We are not alone. Echoes of people downstairs. I can't tell who. Mother, our sister, Nomi perhaps. Someone arrives and sparks excited speech and lengthy silences.

I descend the steps, some hasty greetings, I stuff a roll of coarse, green toilet paper in my pants. Back to the horror, to frisk around the crimson wreckage. I wipe my brother wrathfully from floor and carpet and from couch, reducing him to a ubiquity of chestnut stains. I am not content. He is writhing on the inlay, attempting tears. It's futile, I know. We both forgot the art of crying, except from torn veins.

The light is waning. The brown blinds incarcerate my brother behind penumbral bars. His bony hands and scrawny body in stark relief. It is the first time that I observe him truly. He is lanky but his face unchanged. I was no child when he was born but he is still my little brother.

He is resting now, eyes shut, our lengthy lashes - both mine and his - attached to fluttering lids. Birds trapped in quivering arteries flap at his throat. He is sobbing still but I avert my gaze, afraid to hug him. We oscillate, like two charged particles, my little brother and myself. His arms by his side and my arms by his side, divergent. I thrust into my bulging pocket a ball of ruby paper.

There is a clock in here that ticks the seconds. They used to sound longer. It was another time. The haemorrhage stopped. A mournful lace of plasma on his sinewed wrists. It must have hurt, the old corroded blade, no flesh, just coated skeleton. To saw the bones till blood. To hack the skin, to spread it like a rusty butterfly, dismantling slithery vessels. I move to occupy the wooden ladder back, near the escritoire that I received as gift on the occasion of my first year in school.

He nods affirmative when asked if he can rise. I hold him under hairy, damp armpits. I confront him, seated on my grandma's rocking chair, a cushion clad in Moroccan equine embroidery on my knees. I gently hold his hand and he recoils. I didn't hurt him, though.

I wait for him to break, his hand in mine. Thus clenched, our palms devoid of strength, we face a question and a promise, the fear of pain and of commitment. We dwell on trust.

He unfists and bleeds anew. I use the paper ball to soak it up. It's dripping. I gallop down the spiral staircase and collect another roll, adhesive bandages, and dressing. Into my pocket and, speechlessly, I climb back. He is sitting there, a Pharaonic scribe, wrists resting on his knees, palms lotus flowers, but upturned. His gifted painter's fingers are quenched in blood.

I mop and dab, swab and discard, apply some pressure and erase. My brother is calling me in sanguineous tongue and I deface it, incapable of listening, unwilling to respond.



I bind him and I dress and he opens his eyes and gapes at the white butterflies that sprouted on his joints. He feels them tenderly, astonished by this sudden red-white beauty.

I count his pulse and he gives in to my pseudo-professional mannerisms. His pulse is regular. He hasn't lost a lot of blood, therefore.

He tells me he is OK now and asks for water. All of a sudden, I remember. One day, he was a toddler, could hardly walk, I led him back from the clinic. He gave blood and was weeping bitterly. A giant cotton swab was thrust into his elbow pit and he folded his arm, holding onto it tightly.

One jerky movement, it fell and he stood there, gawking at the soiled lump and whimpering. He was so tiny that I hugged him and wiped the tears from his plump cheeks.

I improvised a story about "Adhesa Cottonball", the cotton monster, who forever wishes to return to the soil, her abode. His eyes cleared and he giggled nervously. This sound - his chuckle - is in my ears, obscuring all real-life acoustics.

He gulps down the water silently, his eyes a distant blackness, where no one treads but he, his forest, among the trees, perhaps this carriage and its attending coachman. Where does he want to go, I wonder?

My brain is working overtime. My skull-domiciled well-oiled machine, whose parts are in metallic shine, impeccable, unerring, impervious to pain. Machines don't ache this brother, sprawled on the couch, his shoulders stooping, in torn shirt and tattered trousers, my erstwhile clothes, his chest hirsute, his face adorned with budding beard and whiskers.

What story shall I tell him now to clear his eyes? How shall I make him laugh again? What monster should I bury in the sand?

I tell him to pack few things and come with me. He acquiesces but still won't budge. His twin wrist-butterflies are quite inert. He sighs as he buttons his shirt and rolls unfastened sleeves to cover his abrasions. When he gets up I see him as before: a gangling figure, an angular face, two cavernous sockets, big brown mole. He drags his feet.

We both descend. Don't tell our parents, he begs, I promise not to. Enters his room and exits fast, carrying a small plastic bag with severed handles. A pair of worn jeans spill from the top to cover some half-deleted lettering.

We bid farewell and walk placidly to the car. He freezes on the back seat, still cradling his plastic treasure, gazing forward but seeing little.

Nomi is driving while I watch him through the windshield mirror. His inanimate stare, directed at the window, is deflected by transparency. Slumped on the imitation leather seat, he and his trousers bump from one side to another on the winding road.

He falls asleep this way, sack closely clutched, chin burrowing into his hollow torso. At times, he shakes his head in stiff refusal. He is very adamant. Only his hands are calm, as though detached from his rebellious body.

Nomi is negotiating the parking and I touch his shoulder. He opens a pair of bleary eyes and looks at me like he used to when I was still his entire world. I touch once more and gently. When he was two years old, I left home for many years, never to be heard from. The hurt resides still in his eyes, that injury.

I touch a third time, thus pledging to remain, thus telling him my love. I study him at length and he does not divert his eyes.

Suddenly he smiles and dimples collect around his lips. He flings his hands high up and waves his red-white butterflies. He imitates their flight. He plucks their wings. He laughs and I respond by laughing and Nomi joins and the space of our car is filled with laughs and butterflies and butterflies and laughter.

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# The Con Man Cometh

by Sam Vaknin

Swathed in luminosity, we stir with measured competence our amber drinks in long-stemmed glasses. You are weighing my offer and I am waiting for your answer with hushed endurance. The armchairs are soft, the lobby is luxurious, as befits five-star hotels. I am not tense. I have anticipated your response even before I made my move.

Soon, temples sheathed in perspiration, you use the outfit's thick paper napkins to wipe it off. Loosen your tie. Pretend to be immersed in calculations. You express strident dissatisfaction and I feign recoil, as though intimidated by your loudness. Withdrawing to my second line of defence, I surrender to your simulated wrath.

The signs are here, the gestures, the infinitesimal movements that you cannot control. I lurk. I know that definite look, that imperceptible twitch, the inevitability of your surrender.

I am a con man and you are my victim. The swindle is unfolding here and now, in this very atrium, amid all the extravagance. I am selling your soul and collecting the change. I am sharpened, like a raw nerve firing impulses to you, receiving yours, an electrical-chemical dialog, consisting of your smelly sweat, my scented exudation. I permeate your cracks. I broker an alliance with your fears, your pains, defence compensatory mechanisms.

I know you.

I've got to meld us into one. As dusk gives way to night, you trust me as you do yourself, for now I am nothing less than you. Having adopted your particular gesticulation, I nod approvingly with every mention of your family. You do not like me. You sense the danger. Your nostrils flare. Your eyes amok. Your hands so restless. You know me for a bilker, you realise I'll break your heart. I know you comprehend we both are choiceless.

It's not about money. Emotions are at stake. I share your depths of loneliness and pain. Sitting opposed, I see the child in you, the adolescent. I discern the pleading sparkle in your eyes, your shoulders stooping in the very second you've decided to succumb. I

am hurting for what I do to you. My only consolation is the inexorability of nature - mine and yours, this world's (in which we find ourselves and not of our choice). Still, we are here, you know.

I empathise with you without speech or motion. Your solitary sadness, the anguish, and your fears. I am your only friend, monopolist of your invisible cries, your inner haemorrhage of salty tears, the tissue scar that has become your being. Like me, the product of uncounted blows (which you sometimes crave).

Being abused is being understood, having some meaning, forming a narrative. Without it, your life is nothing but an anecdotal stream of randomness. I deal the final, overwhelming coup-de-grace that will transform the torn sheets of your biography into a plot. It isn't everyday one meets a cheat. Such confident encounters can render everything explained. Don't give it up. It is a gift of life, not to be frivolously dispensed with. It is a test of worthiness.

I think you qualify and I am the structure and the target you've been searching for and here I am.

Now we are bound by money and by blood. In our common veins flows the same alliance that dilates our pupils. We hail from one beginning. We separated only to unite, at once, in this hotel, this late, and you exclaim: "I need to trust you like I do not trust a soul". You beseech me not to betray your faith. Perhaps not so explicitly, but both your eyes are moist, reflecting your vulnerability.

I gravely radiate my utter guarantee of splendid outcomes. No hint of treason here. Concurrently I am plotting your emotional demise. At your request, not mine. It is an act of amity, to rid you of the very cause of your infirmity. I am the instrument of your delivery and liberation. I will deprive you of your ability to feel, to trust, and to believe. When we diverge, I will have moulded you anew - much less susceptible, much more immune, the essence of resilience.

It is my gift to you and you are surely grateful in advance. Thus, when you demand my fealty, you say: "Do not forget our verbal understanding."

And when I vow my loyalty, I answer: "I shall not forget to stab you in the back."

And now, to the transaction. I study you. I train you to ignore my presence and argue with yourself with the utmost sincerity. I teach you not to resent your weaknesses.

So, you admit to them and I record all your confessions to be used against you to your benefit. Denuded of defences, I leave you

wounded by embezzlement, a cold, contemptible exposure. And, in the meantime, it's only warmth and safety, the intimacy of empathy, the propinquity of mutual understanding.

I only ask of you one thing: the fullest trust, a willingness to yield. I remember having seen the following in an art house movie, it was a test: to fall, spread-eagled from a high embankment and to believe that I am there to catch you and break your lethal plunge.

I am telling you I'll be there, yet you know I won't. Your caving in is none of my concern. I only undertook to bring you to the brink and I fulfilled this promise. It's up to you to climb it, it's up to you to tumble. I must not halt your crash, you have to recompose. It is my contribution to the transformation that metastasised in you long before we met.

But you are not yet at the stage of internalising these veracities. You still naively link feigned geniality to constancy, intimacy and confidence in me and in my deeds, proximity and full disclosure. You are so terrified and mutilated, you come devalued. You cost me merely a whiskey tumbler and a compendium of ordinary words. One tear enough to alter your allegiances. You are malleable to the point of having no identity.

You crave my touch and my affection. I crave your information and unbridled faith. "Here is my friendship and my caring, my tenderness and amity, here is a hug. I am your parent and your shrink, your buddy and your family" - so go the words of this inaudible dialog - "Give me your utter, blind, trust but limit it to one point only: your money or your life."

I need to know about your funds, the riddles of your boardroom, commercial secrets, your skeletons, some intimate detail, a fear, resurgent hatred, the envy that consumes. I don't presume to be your confidant. Our sharing is confined to the pecuniary. I lull you into the relief that comes with much reduced demands. But you are an experienced businessman! You surely recognise my tactics and employ them, too!

Still, you are both seduced and tempted, though on condition of maintaining "independent thinking". Well, almost independent. There is a tiny crack in your cerebral armour and I am there to thrust right through it. I am ready to habituate you. "I am in full control" - you'd say - "So, where's the threat?" And, truly, there is none.

There's only certainty. The certitude I offer you throughout our game. Sometimes I even venture: "I am a crook to be avoided". You listen with your occidental manners, head tilted obliquely,

and when I am finished warning you, you say: "But where the danger lies? My trust in you is limited!" Indeed - but it is there!

I lurk, awaiting your capitulation, inhabiting the margins, the twilight zone twixt greed and paranoia. I am a viral premonition, invading avaricious membranes, preaching a gospel of death and resurrection. Your death, your rising from the dead. Assuming the contours of my host, I abandon you deformed in dissolution.

There's no respite, not even for a day. You are addicted to my nagging, to my penetrating gaze, instinctive sympathy, you're haunted. I don't let go. You are engulfed, cocooned, I am a soul mate of eerie insight, unselfish acumen. I vitiate myself for your minutest needs. I thrive on servitude. I leave no doubt that my self-love is exceeded only by my love for you.

I am useful and you are a user. I am available and you avail yourself. But haven't you heard that there are no free lunches? My restaurant is classy, the prices most exorbitant, the invoices accumulate with every smile, with every word of reassurance, with every anxious inquiry as to your health, with every sacrifice I make, however insubstantial.

I keep accounts in my unstated books and you rely on me for every double entry. The voices I instill in you: "He gives so of himself though largely unrewarded". You feel ashamed, compelled to compensate. A seed of Trojan guilt. I harp on it by mentioning others who deprived me. I count on you to do the rest. There's nothing more potent than egotistic love combined with raging culpability. You are mine to do with as I wish, it is your wish that I embody and possess.

The vise is tightened. Now it's time to ponder whether to feed on you at once or scavenge. You are already dying and in your mental carcass I am grown, an alien. Invoking your immunity, as I am wont to do, will further make you ill and conflict will erupt between your white cells and your black, the twin abodes of your awakened feelings.

You hope against all odds that I am a soul-mate. How does it feel, the solitude? Few days with me - and you cannot recall! But I cannot remember how it feels to be together. I cannot waive my loneliness, my staunch companion. When I am with you, it prospers. And you must pay for that.

I have no choice but to abscond with your possessions, lest I remain bereft. With utmost ethics, I keep you well-informed of these dynamics and you acknowledge my fragility which makes you desirous to salve my wounds.

But I maintain the benefit of your surprise, the flowing motion. Always at an advantage over you, the interchangeable. I, on the other hand, cannot be replaced, as far as you're concerned. You are a loyal subject of your psychic state while I am a denizen of the eternal hunting grounds. No limits there, nor boundaries, only the nostrils quivering at the game, the surging musculature, the body fluids, the scent of decadence.

Sometime, the prey becomes the predator, but only for a while. Admittedly, it's possible and you might turn the tables. But you don't want to. You crave so to be hunted. The orgiastic moment of my proverbial bullets penetrating willing flesh, the rape, the violation, the metaphoric blood and love, you are no longer satisfied with compromises.

You want to die having experienced this eruption once. For what is life without such infringement if not mere ripening concluding in decay. What sets us, Man, apart from beast is our ability to self-deceive and swindle others. The rogue's advantage over quarry is his capacity to have his lies transmuted till you believe them true.

I trek the unpaved pathways between my truth and your delusions. What am I, fiend or angel? A weak, disintegrating apparition - or a triumphant growth? I am devoid of conscience in my own reflection. It is a cause for mirth. My complex is binary: to fight or flight, I'm well or ill, it should have been this way or I was led astray.

I am the blinding murkiness that never sets, not even when I sleep. It overwhelms me, too, but also renders me farsighted. It taught me my survival: strike ere you are struck, abandon ere you're trashed, control ere you are subjugated.

So what do you say to it now? I told you everything and haven't said a word. You knew it all before. You grasp how dire my need is for your blood, your hurt, the traumatic coma that will follow. They say one's death bequeaths another's life. It is the most profound destination, to will existence to your pining duplicate.

I am plump and short, my face is uncontrived and smiling. When I am serious, I am told, I am like a battered and deserted child and this provokes in you an ancient cuddling instinct. When I am proximate, your body and your soul are unrestrained. I watch you kindly and the artificial lighting of this magnificent vestibule bounces off my glasses.

My eyes are cradled in blackened pouches of withered skin. I draw your gaze by sighing sadly and rubbing them with weary hands. You incline our body, gulp the piquant libation, and sign

the document. Then, leaning back, you shut exhausted eyes.  
There is no doubt: you realise your error.

It's not too late. The document lies there, it's ready for the tearing. But you refrain. You will not do it.

"Another drink?" - You ask.

I smile, my chubby cheeks and wire glasses sparkle.

"No, thanks" - I say.

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# Janusz Courts Dinah

by Sam Vaknin

Read the [Hebrew original](#).

Janusz thrusts his head through the illuminated window, deep into the house, his desperate shadow bedaubed across the wall. We shelter Dinah, a chimera of heads and bodies, protecting her from Janusz, from his love, from his contorted face, as he bawls, in his intellectual accent:

"But I want Dinah, let me speak with Dinah!"

Dinah's face alight, attainted red. It has been a long time since she was wooed so forcefully. Janusz, consumed by twilight, bellowing ignominiously in public. It flatters her, evoking stirrings she can recognise. She giggles uncomfortably, a beauty framed in silky skin and pearly teeth.

Janusz sits by day on colour-peeling, fading benches. His body arched with twanging dignity, his equine face buried in a thickset tome, exaggerated eyes peering through the magnifying lenses of his gold-rimmed glasses. From time to time, he chases a dogged, greasy curl away from his alpestrine forehead.

It was this expansive brow that most impressed me as a child. A swathe, pulsating in venous green, a milky desert, crisscrossed with brittle capillaries and strewn with bony rocks. Beneath this tract was Janusz: his wondering eyes, penumbral sockets, and slithering hair.

When he summoned Dinah, his face erupted into creases, as wastelands do before the rain. "Go away, crazy one" - my grandma, Dinah's mother, used to shout at him half-heartedly, as she shuttered the rickety windows. But even Janusz, who I, informed by hindsight, now know to have been really cracked - even he perceived my grandma's protests as eccentrically veiled summonses.

Grinning, he would press his face against the frozen casement, his Hellenic nose made into a bulbous offering, befogged, only his toothy smile remains, then gone.

The Seder was often celebrated at my grandparents. Tables colluded under shimmering white clothes, bleached by my grandma in plastic vessels. Matzos and wine bottles served porcelain and crystal bowls with scarlet sparkles. My mother and my father observed, dejected, from the corners of the room, two strangers in an intimate occasion.

My parents, unloved, rejected by both progenitors and progeny, clinging together, having survived their families. With eyes downcast, hands sculpting breadcrumbs or folding and unfolding wrinkled napkins, they silently cruised through the night, tight-lipped and stiff.

It was an awry evening. My grandpa, drowsed by medication, ensconced in sleepy, torn pyjamas, read the Haggadah perfunctorily. We devoured the food doled out by my grandma from steamy, leaden pots. We ate with bated silence, a choir of cutlery and chomp. Immersed in yellow lighting, we cast our shadows at each other. A tiny wooden bird sprang forth, recounting time from a cuckoo clock my father gifted to my grandparents.

Still silent, my grandma and my aunts began to clear the table, when Janusz implored Dinah, from the windowpane, to exit and meet him in the dusk. My grandmother didn't utter a single syllable as she fastened the blinders in his face. Janusz whimpered. The stillness was only interrupted by the clattering plates and the whishing sounds of lacey aprons.

Until the door, forced open, let in a tremulous Janusz, his shoulders stooping, his head askance, filling the frame with writhing apprehension and zealous hope. The door - two planks adjoined with sawdust - protested but Janusz didn't budge. His forehead sketched with rain-drenched hair, his eyes exuding watery anticipation, he stood there, sculpting with his twitchy hands an airy bust of Dinah. The odours of decaying food and festering sweat mingled with the crispness of the drizzle.

He tore her name from tortured chest: "DINAH!!!"

The women stifled a fearful shriek. The giant Janusz filled the room as he progressed in pilgrimage towards Dinah, his sinewy hands extended, the muscles rippling in his arms. There and then, we in the role of silent witnesses, he courted her, quoting from Kafka and Freud and Tolstoy. That night he called upon the spirits of his library, whose books he romanced on benches under all the lampposts in the township's parks. He sang her arias and, for a moment, he carried her away from us. His reputation was

cemented by this nocturnal recital. We didn't understand a word he said, his music fell on arid ears.

My mother beseeched him softly, shocking us all:

"Go away, Janusz, Dinah is tired."

It was the first thing she said that evening. She then stood up, stretching her pygmy frame, pinning on Janusz her kaleidoscopic brown-green gaze. Her hair braked, cropped, atop her shoulders. Janusz, taken aback, studied her as one would an exotic species. His hands, two violent spirals, breached desperately the musty air. My mother stepped up to him and, looking into befuddled eyes, she reiterated her pleading command:

"Go away, Janusz" - and, then, soothingly - "Dinah will see you tomorrow."

Janusz's body crumbled. His shoulders bowed, he took his glasses off, withdrew a patterned flannel shirt from his trousers and polished them meticulously. His lake-blue eyesight fluttered. He placed his eyecups back, forgetting to restore his attire.

"I only want to talk to her" - he protested tamely - "I only want to tell her to marry me because I love her."

My mother nodded understandingly:

"This is not the time. You must go now. It is Passover, the Seder night, and you are intruding."

He reciprocated miserably and retreated crab-like, sideways, afraid to turn his back on the hostile room.

Dinah watched him from the kitchen, numbed. She absentmindedly arranged her hair and tightened the dull apron around her narrow waist. She pulled her blouse to carve her breasts, and, to adjust her stocking, she stretched a bronzed and streamlined leg.

Janusz gulped these inadvertent sights, quenching a burgeoning lust.

My mother repeated with irrevocable finality:

"Goodbye, Janusz!"

Awakened and subdued, he headed for the exit.

Then Dinah exclaimed:

"Janusz, wait, I will come with you!"

She hurled the balled apron at us and went and flanked Janusz, provocatively linking arms with him. Janusz stiffened, eyes tensely shut, afraid to shatter this dream of Dinah by his side. My mother fired a glaucous look at her sister, turned her back effusively, and sank into her chair, deflated. Janusz extended one leg towards the exit and Dinah somnambulated after him. Thus, torturously, they

vanished into the murky, thunderstruck, outside, leaving the door ajar to the rain sprays and ozone smell of a gathering storm.

All the adults commenced and ceased to speak at once. My grandfather snored, his breath deflected by his sprawling chin, fluttering among the white curls on his denuded chest. My grandma concealed him in a tattered afghan and sat beside him, fingering a bracelet helplessly. One of my uncles cleared his throat in bass, regretted this promised speech, and slumped into his chair. They all eyed my father, the oldest and most experienced among them. But he kept mum.

They sat there for a while. My father tore apart the shutters and squinted in a futile effort to discern something in the gloom. The streetlamps were few and far between and the tepid lighting of the Seder barely brightened the room's far corners, let alone the alleyway.

The young ones dozed, bowing to soiled plates, their crumpled, stained, cloth bibs bobbing in a sea of matzo crumbs.

"Hard-headed" - muttered my grandma and my mother assented absentmindedly. Someone brought my grandma a glass of water. She dipped her lips and crusty tongue and smacked. "Maybe we should call the police" - ventured another uncle of mine, but we knew this was a non-starter.

Dinah got divorced in her early twenties, abandoned by her husband. She found refuge in her parents' home and cared for them and for those of her siblings who still resided there. She scuffed the floor and scrubbed the dishes. In the evenings, she settled down, legs crossed beneath her wearily, gazing at life unfolding from the porch, puffing at a medley of fidgety cigarettes. She had the dead countenance of the introspective. We tiptoed around her and soothingly vilified her former husband to her face.

At first, she clung to life. She raised a son and daughter in the squalid quarters of her parents. But when her daughter succumbed to leukemia, she was a broken vessel. She shipped her son to a foster family in a Kibbutz and sought employment in a hospice for the terminally ill. There, among the dead and dying, she spent most of her time, often napping, in between shifts, in a bed still sweating of its former, now deceased, occupant. Or she would sprawl on an operating table, among blood spattered bandages and slabs of sanguinary flesh in overflowing buckets.

She rarely returned to her parents now, to assume her tiny chamber, with its monastic bed, and ramshackle dresser. She has not dated, neither has she been with a man since her divorce.

And now, this, into the night with the deranged and violent Janusz, who wastes his time on books, on public benches in twilight parks. What could he do to her?

"A beautiful woman is only trouble" - someone said and everyone hummed in consent.

"Poor Dinah" - sighed another aunt, summing in these three syllables her entire shrivelling misery.

It was stuffy and men wiped foreheads with blemished handkerchiefs, doffing synthetic shirts imbrued with perspiration. Someone turned on the radio and off again. Others pressed frayed rags against the leaking window frames.

"She is not herself since Sima died" - my grandmother intoned in vacant words. No one mentioned Uzi, Dinah's only son, my cousin, my friend, irrevocably adopted now. I thought to myself: Dinah may be sad on his account as well. No one suggested that she misses him as badly as she does her daughter and her husband, who deserted her, amidst this budding emptiness, without saying why.

Mother served a round of roasting, grainy coffee, in tiny demitasses. A symphony of smacking lips and groans of pleasure followed.

"What are we to do now?" - my grandma said, her voice monotonous, her fingers curled around the trimmings of her dress - "She eloped with this madman. What's wrong with her? She has a handsome, clever child, a warm home, a steady job."

My mother stared at her and then away. My uncle, Gabi, said: "There's more to life than these."

"What more is there to life?" - erupted my grandma, approaching him with scorching eyes - "What do you have in yours? Do you have a wife, a home, or children? Almost thirty years old and still a toddler, unemployed, subsisting on the marrow of this old man here..."

My uncle, springing to his feet, circumnavigated the table to face my grandma and then, his mind changed, he exited the house, banging the door behind him wrathfully.

"I also must go" - mumbled his younger brother awkwardly - "My friends are waiting. We are going to have us a good time in the square, we..." - and he ran out tearfully.

Mother peered at the orphaned coffee cups and sipped from hers. She poured my father some more, avoiding his searching gaze.

"Never works, he is killing his old man, destroying his life" - my grandma repeated disparagingly. My mother nodded.

My father said:

"The aluminium here must be painted, it's all so rusty. I can do it for you on Saturday."

No one responded. Someone flattened a mosquito between two palms and studied the bloodied outcome.

"It's tough to be alone" - Aliza blurted - "She has no man and Sima dead and Uzi..."

"I am alone" - Nitzkhia countered.

"I hope she doesn't do anything stupid" - my father cautioned no one in particular - "This Janusz is a nutcase."

"He loves her" - Aliza said with wistful confidence - "He will not harm her."

"The worst is when you love" - my mother said - "The worst crimes are passionate."

She jumped to her feet and hurried to the kitchen to rid her dress of a budding coffee stain.

My father examined the shutters closely, unfurling them and back. "Stop that" - my mother sniped at him and he collapsed into his chair, embarrassed.

"It's late" - Nitzkhia said - "Maybe we should fan out and look for Dinah."

"She'll be back" - my mother reassured her nervously, fighting a losing battle with the spot - "She has nowhere else to go. He shares the same room with his mother. She watches over him relentlessly. If you ask me, there is something unhealthy going on between these two. No wonder he is like that."

"God" - exhaled my grandma - "I hate to imagine what the neighbours will invent: the two, alone, on the Seder night, in a public park..."

"He is a good person, this poor guy, he wouldn't harm a fly, how could anyone believe that they ... together ... I am not sure he could do it even if he knew what to do..." - Aliza laughed heartily, exposing equine teeth, and waving back a mane of waning blonde.

Everyone brayed and then earnestness reasserted itself. Dinah still hasn't returned and she was out there, with Janusz.

"I have cookies in sugar or in honey" - my grandma chuntered and motioned to the kitchen listlessly. My mother and Aliza rushed to fetch two outsized bowls containing triangular pastry floating in a golden syrupy lake.

"I still think that we should go out and look for her" - Nitzkhia insisted dreamily.

"Let's start to clear the table" - my mother instructed me and my sister. We helped her carry greasy plates and cutlery and

shapeless napkins to the kitchen and pile them there indiscriminately. Mother rolled up her sleeves, donned a checkered pinafore, and started to scour away the evening with minimal, efficient moves.

"Mother" - I said meekly - "we haven't sung the Passover hymns."

She rinsed the dishes emphatically and used a drab cloth towel to dry them.

"Mother" - I persisted - "It is not the same without the signing." I liked to chime in and yodel the refrains.

"Well, I think we will be on our way now" - I heard Aliza from the other room. Nitzkhia had nowhere to go back to, she lived with my grandfather and grandmother.

"Mother" - I was panicky now, but I knew not why - "Gabi and Itsik have gone and now Aliza, too! No one is left!"

My mother froze and then, bending towards me, she tousled my hair, her hand all wet and soapy.

I shut my eyes and opened them repeatedly to repel her rivulets of stinging water. I was crying now and my sobbing swelled in me and I was swept in frazzled tremulousness, wiping my running nose on the back of a sullied hand. My younger sister retreated to the corner, kneeling, and snivelled inaudibly.

Mother just stood there, hands airborne, observing us in anxious helplessness. She tried to utter something but it came out a feeble "Don't you cry now, children" - my father glided from the adjacent room and leaned a naked, bronze, shoulder on the doorframe, his face a sad and distant mask.

"Why are they crying?" - he enquired no one in particular.

"Because we didn't sing the Passover hymns" - my mother countered in a stifled voice.

Father knelt and cradled me in his arms. He embarked on a monotonous Moroccan tune, until my tears subsided and, enraptured by the distant melody, I fell silent. I joined him in a seamless medley of Passover hymns, my voice lachrymose and screeching. My mother reverted to her chores by the basin and Sima, my sister, absorbed it all in her usual mousy taciturnity.

Father held my hand in his spacious, warm palm and led me back to the table, chanting all the way and rhythmically pressing my flesh, spurring me on to join him. We were the only two singing, now in hushed voices, not to wake my grandpa. My sister climbed onto my father's knee, her scalp safely ensconced in his moustache, head nodding to her chest, eyelids undulating dreams.

"We are going" - reiterated Aliza. She arose and straightened an erstwhile festive dress. As she was circling the table, Dinah barged

in and hesitated by the threshold, prodded inside by the rain that drenched us all. An invisible hand shut the door behind her.

She was soaked, her hair in ropy waterfalls, her clothes an aqueous pulp, her wide feet bare. She gravitated towards a vacant chair and folded, planted in a swelling puddle.

My mother, exiting the kitchen, stared at her, alarmed.

"Where were you?" - demanded my grandmother bleakly.

Dinah shrugged. "We strolled in the public park. We walked a lot. He talked to me. His speech is beautiful, like a gentleman's. He is wise and erudite. He speaks six languages."

"Then he is definitely not for you" - my grandma interrupted rudely - "We have enough whackos in the family."

Dinah shivered. "He is not a whacko, don't call him that!"

My mother served her scalding coffee and my grandmother kept mumbling crabily: "He is not for you, Donna. You forget about him this very instant!"

Dinah sipped the beverage, her eyes occluding pleasurably. She unwrapped them, green and crystalline, and said: "It all remains to be seen. It all remains to be seen."

My grandma grumbled despondently and gestured dismissively at Dinah's optimism: "As you have ill-chosen your first one, so shall you cherry-pick your second one, no doubt. Good for nothings. Only trouble and heartbreak await you."

And my mother said:

"Come children, let us go home. This is an adult conversation" - as she fired a cautionary glance at the interlocutors.

"Let them sleep in my room" - Dinah said - "Sometimes even adults have to talk."

"We all eat what we cook" - my mother sniggered - "Dating someone like that is like laying your bed with sheets of misfortune and blankets of unhappiness. Just don't come to us complaining that we haven't forewarned you."

"I never came to you for anything, let alone complaining" - retorted Dinah bitterly - "And not that I had nothing to complain about."

"What now?" - Aliza asked, still on her ostensible way out - "What have you decided?"

"What is there to decide after one evening together?" - riposted Dinah.

"Will you go on seeing him?" - Nitzkhia challenged her.

"I think I will" - responded Dinah ponderously - "I had a pleasant and interesting time tonight. He is a charming man and I don't care how he appears to you."



"He is insane" - my grandma groaned - "And you are even nuttier if you consider dating him again. In any case, you are through with us. Take your belongings and let us see the last of you if you intend to follow through with this disgrace."

Dinah trembled, chewing on her upper lip to refrain from crying. "You would have not spoken like that if daddy were awake" - she spluttered.

"You heard me?" - my grandma sniped at her, coughing and massaging her chest, fending off an imminent demise - "From tomorrow, find yourself another place!"

A distant mannish voice trilled opera arias. It approached, bathing the room and us, and Janusz knocked on the wooden shutters and called:

"Dinah, can I tell you something?"

And again:

"Dinah, can you come out for a moment?"

A tentative knock.

Dinah half-arose, supported by the armrests.

"Dinah?" - Janusz's voice, astounded, invaded by its onetime stutter - "Do you hear me? Are you there?" My grandmother fixated Dinah with a tocsin look. Dinah stumbled towards the door, entranced, her hand extended, her mouth agape but speechless. She then sealed both her eyes and mouth and, thus, stood frozen, heaving imperceptibly.

"Dinah" - spurted Janusz - "I love you, I have always loved you, don't be cruel to me, I just want to tell you one little thing, one minute of your life, make it one second" - he paused and then - "I respect you greatly. We can talk through the window curtains. You do not have to come out to me."

Two tearful tributaries, two becks of salty rain, carved up Dinah's features. She returned to her seat, burying her oval countenance in futile hands.

Sighing deeply, my grandma neared the window. She propped herself against the soggy panes and through the fastened blinds she bellowed:

"Go away! Away from here, you crazy fool!"

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# My Affair with Jesus

by Sam Vaknin

Read the [Hebrew original](#).

Losing my mind in a bed-sitter. Pipes crackling in the kitchenette, spewing faecal water in the bathroom, only the urinal a tolerable translucence. The cramped space is consumed by a rough-hewn timber bed, prickly wool blankets strewn. The sheets a crumpled ball, spotted with ageing spittle stains. The window looks onto another window. Mine is a corporate apartment in Geneva, a menacing physical presence of solitude and silence crystallised.

On weekend mornings I promenade at length: along the lake shores, traverse the foothills, the sumptuous mansions of the rich, back through the marina and the slums, behind the "Noga-Hilton".

On my return, the flat contracts, the standard issue table, the single chair, my scattered clothing, the metered rotary dial phone, the French and German television channels I cannot understand.

Once weekly, on Monday morns, a woman comes to clean. Her legs are cast in limpid stockings, I smell her cleanser perspiration. A coarse elastic reins her stonewashed hair. She is not bejewelled. She wears a pair of twisted wire-rims. Her husband sometimes tags along, buried under her scrubbing implements.

She hardly ever acknowledges my cornered and abashed existence, like a besuited mummy with gleaming imitation leather shoes. She does my laundry and my ironing, too.

I did not want to die. I sought refuge in numbers, solace in propinquity. I thought I'd join the Jesuits.

I strolled to the United Nations building and met a senior bureaucrat, a member of the order. His angled modest office overlooked a busy "work-in-progress" intersection, but he renounced this distraction. He listened to my well-rehearsed oration and referred me to a monastery at the other end of town.

Ambling along the waterfront, I scrutinised the flower beds, the tourists, and the spout. Even at dusk, I found this city languid.

All shops were closed.

I had a dinner date with a Londoner, a naturalised Iranian oil trader. Throughout the meal he kept rebuking me:

"You sound like someone whose life is long behind him. It is not true! You are so young!"

I drove my shrimps amongst the Thousand Islands in my bowl.

"You are observant, Sir" - I said - "but wrong. I may be possessed of past, but not of future" - I gauged the impact of my harsh pronouncement - "Not necessarily a thing to mourn" - I added.

He rearranged the remnants of his dinner on his soiled plate. I gathered that he was far too experienced to be optimistic.

I visited the friary next morning. A young monk, clad in sportswear eyed me with surprise. I mentioned my referrer and was instantly admitted. We occupied a metal bench amidst a bustling corridor.

He told me about the order. They study several years, embark on charitable missions in far-flung countries, and then take vows.

I reassured him I was celibate and he pretended to believe me.

Gene called and invited me to his bookstore to inspect a new shipment. I used to spend all weekends there, reading, socialising, and devouring unwholesome food in the adjacent restaurant. Shoppers came and went. Gene would register the day's meager intake in his books and lock the entrance door. Sometimes we would proceed to patronise an Old City coffeehouse. But usually I would return to my alcove and wait for Monday.

That day, when I arrived, Gene offered me a cup of lukewarm coffee and said: "Stay with me, please, this evening."

The last client having departed, he bolted the iron shutters and we proceeded uptown, to get drunk. It was a farewell sacrament, Gene having lost his savings and a lot of other people's funds.

He climbed to my apartment and wept throughout the night of his intoxicated desperation. I woke to find him gone.

Thus, my world narrowed. The weather chilled. I couldn't pierce the stubborn rainfall that swathed my windowpanes. Arrayed in heavy overcoat, I sat, a patchwork quilt of light and shade. Or fully dressed, prostrated, the blankets heaped, on my Procrustean bed.

People from Israel stayed at my place. They ate my food and slept and showered. Then they moved off. I travelled back there on vacation. A journalist who did my profile years ago, refused to interview me. He said: "Dead horses do not make a story." My nightmares swelled with equine carcasses discharging jets of ink-black blood.

Come winter, I called on the priory again.

"You must first see the light, see Jesus" - my youthful guide insisted but, ready with a riposte, I rejoined:

"There are many paths to one's salvation and one's saviour."

Savouring my worn platitude, he promised to arrange for an interview in Zurich, the regional headquarters.

So many years have passed since then.

Perhaps a dream, perhaps a motion picture snippet, perhaps I am overwhelmed by one of my confabulations. I remember descending from a train, ankle-high in rustling snow, treading uncharted tracks towards an illuminated building, a boarding school. The manageress conducts a prideful tour of speckled premises. Toddlers in flowery pyjamas amuse themselves with ligneous cubes and plastic toys.

I can't remember if I have never been there.

That morning, in Zurich, I climbed up a hill, next to the colossal railway, and rang an ornate bell at the gate of an unassuming office building. I was let into an antechamber and led into the quarters of the abbot. He had a kind face, without a trace of gullibility. His desk was neatly organised, framed by heaving bookcases and shafts of greying light.

I was being examined, oblivious to the rules. "Why do you wish to join us?" - he enquired, then - "Follow me." We climbed down to the dormitories of the fresh initiates. He mutely pointed at the crooked berths, the metal chests, the hanging hair shirts. "We fast a lot. We pray from dawn till midnight."

He introduced me to the novices. "They look so happy and resilient" - I noted. He smiled. Echoes of clerical exertion from above rebounded in the cellar.

"We've got some guests" - he clarified, and suddenly awakening - "Have you already eaten?"

We crossed a lengthy passage veined with piping, thrusting agape the heavy oak doors at its end. I entered first, he followed, to face a purple multitude of churchmen. They rose in noiseless unison and waited.

My host declaimed:

"We have a Jewish guest, from Israel today" - he hesitated - "He will say grace for us. In Hebrew."

The hall reverberated. My host impelled me forward. A sea of crimson skullcaps as they rested foreheads on locked, diaphanous digits. I uttered the Jewish prayer slowly, improvising some. The alien phrases recoiled from the masonry, bounced among the massive trestle-tops, ricocheted from the clay utensils, the crude-

carved cutlery, the cotton tablecloths. A towering Jesus bled into a candled recess.

The abbot led me to a chair and placed a bowl of nebulous soup in front. He stuck a wooden spoon right in the swirling liquid and went away. I ate, head bowed, maintaining silence, conforming to the crowd's ostentatious decorum. The repast over, I joined the abbot and his guests in the procession to his office. He recounted proudly the tale of my most imminent conversion.

They looked aghast. One of them enquired how I found Jesus. I said I hadn't yet. The abbot smiled contentedly. "He is not a liar" - he averred - "He doesn't lie even when lying leads to profit." "Perhaps the profitable thing to do is to be truthful in this case" - one bitterly commented.

The train back to Geneva crisscrossed a radiant medley, deserted streets spanned by forlorn bridges, and spectral streetlamps. I exited into the ceilinged station, to the ascending roads and winding paths and broader avenues, on to my flat. Immersed in shadows to emerge in light, I gazed at curtained windows tightly shut. I window-shopped and kicked some gravel.

At the entrance to my building I didn't turn on the light. I couldn't face the immaculate stairwell, the doormats, the planted pots of crucible steel. But darkness meant a lethal fall or stepping in the wrong apartment, intruding on the astonished life of someone else (the keys were all identical, I suspected). I couldn't cope even with mine.

I turned around, into the public park, across the inner yard, down to the looping street that bordered on the water. The lake was silver struck and boats bobbed up and down abstracted waves. Moon, cleaved by stooping branches, hills vaporising into mist. I circumvented them, resting on soggy benches, the stations of my pilgrimage.

The lake and road diverged and I arrested at the slopes. I dithered momentarily and then proceeded to ascend the footpath, liberally dotted with fallen leaves and broken twigs. Submerged in muddy soil, the rich substrate of foliar death, I kicked the ripeness of dispersing acorns.

I stopped in front of Dudley's home - a medieval French chateau - to study yet again its contumacious contours. Inside, behind the gate, Dudley constructed a tiny summer house atop a brook. We oft debated topics there we both knew little of. I never came there unannounced or uninvited.

Moonlight transforms brickwork chateaux into the stuff of magic. They take your breath away and hurl it back at you until it

splinters. A canine wail, how apt, as though directed. Ripples of wholeness, happy containment, perfect abundance.

I went back the way I came, booting the same pebbles, hard on my heels, ethereal presence. The night inflamed. I arrived at my apartment, the stacks of documents and books, a glass of opaque water, the stale exhaling carpet, talk shows unfolding in a thick Bavarian accent. I half expect an angry neighbour to tap his wall - our wall - with naked palms. Or, worse, the cleaning lady.

At home, it's almost dawn, a blue horizon. I slit a tidy envelope and draw its innards.

The abbot advises me to prepare to visit Boston in the following week. I am expected there for an in-depth interview. I made a good impression. "Your motives look sincere." In Christ.

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# The Last Days

by Sam Vaknin

For years now I have been urinating into flower pots, spraying the shiny leaves, the fissured russet soil.

Typically, as time passes, the plant I pee on blackens. It is an odd and ominous hue, a mesh of bronze and mustard arteries, like poisoning.

Still, it keeps on growing in degenerate defiance against me and its nature.

I often contemplate this toxic quirk of mine.

Does it amount to a behaviour pattern, a set of familiar, oft-repeated acts that verge on psychological automatism?

And if it does - is it peculiar? Who is to judge, by whose authority? What are the moral, or other, standards used to determine my eccentricity or idiosyncrasy?

I am not even sure the quirk is mine.

Admittedly, the urine thus expelled, a cloudy saffron, or a flaxen shade, emerges from the pallid, limp appendage to which I'm indisputably attached. But this, as far as I am concerned, does not transform my waste disposal into a pattern of behaviour, nor does it make this habitual discharge mine.

My observations of the routines of my evacuation onto horticultural containers are detached (I am almost tempted to label them "objective"). I ferret out the common denominators of all these incidents.

I never abuse a potted plant when given access to a restroom less than three minutes walk away. I judiciously use "three minutes". There have been cases of houseplant mutilation when the nearest WC was three minutes and ten seconds far.

Also I never purge myself merely for pleasure or convenience. I can conscientiously say that the opposite is true: I resort to my vegetables only in times of acute distress, beyond endurance. Undeniably, the physical release I feel entails emotional relief and the faint traces of the exudative orgasm one experiences with a whorish, feral woman, who is not one's spouse.

The longer I persevere, the fiercer the cascade, sculpting the loam to form lakes of mud and rustling froth.

Another matter that greatly occupies me is the in-depth perusal of the circumstances in which my preferences of elimination shift.

A prime condition, of course, is the availability of a planter. I find these in offices and other public places. I cherish the risk of being found excreting in these urns - the potential social condemnation, the forced commitment to a madhouse.

But why? What causes this fluidal exhibitionism?

The exposure of my member is important. The wafting chill upon my foreskin. It is primordially erotic, a relic of my childhood. We pee like that when we are toddlers: the organ bare, observed by all and sundry, the source of foaming falls.

It's an important point, this nippy air of infancy.

Equally, there is the delicious hazard of being spotted by a beautiful woman or by the authorities (a policeman, a warden, when I was in jail).

Yet, the wished for outcomes of this recklessness are by no means ascertained.

Consider the authorities.

This act is so in breach of my much-cultivated image as European intellectual - that I anticipate being thoroughly ignored, in an attempt to avoid the realisation that they've been cheated (or were they simply too obtuse to notice my blatant preference for herbal floods?)

Even more inauspicious:

They may be coerced into conceding that not everyone can safely be defined or subjected to immutable classification. This forced admission would undermine the pillars of their social order. It's better to pretend that they do believe my story - as I hurriedly button my open fly - that I was merely sorting out my clothes. They hasten to avert their eyes from the dark stain that encompasses my squirting manhood.

A beautiful woman is another matter altogether.

If she happens to detect me, it has the makings of pornography. Being the right type, this can be the beginning of a great, blue passion.

I am not sure what is the legal status of my actions. Unobserved, in the absence of a gasping public - my exposure is not indecent. So what is it? An obscenity? Damage to public property? A corruption of the morals? Is there an offence in the codex thus described: "Exposing one's penis to the breeze while standing over a black and brown and yellow plant?"



I bet there isn't - though one can never be too sure. We are, therefore, left with the phenomenology of my exploits. Put less genteelly: we can describe the act but are very far from comprehending it.

I also notice that I resort to flowerpots before I browse a book, or while I do it, or after. I use my lower culvert to expunge my upper sewer of all manner of read cerebral effluence.

My learned piss, my highbrow vinegar.

While immersed in reading, sometimes I forget to drink for many hours. It does not affect the frequency of my eliminations. I, therefore, feel compelled to establish no connection between fluids consumed and urine produced when intellectually engaged. My higher functions offer splendid regulation of my aqueous economy.

My manner of urinating in plant containers is different to the way I pee in the gleaming bowls of regular loos. Confined among the tiles, I discharge meticulously, in a thin and measured trickle, free to ruminate on theoretical matters or to consider the last woman to have abandoned me and why she has.

I judge her reasons flimsy.

Out in nature - as reified by shrivelling potted shrubs - I experience a breakdown in communication with my wand. I find myself cajoling it both verbally and by straining the muscles of my bladder and my lower abdomen. I wag it with a mildness that masks suppressed hostility and pent aggression. I begrudge it the spontaneity and variegation of its inner and outer lives.

Following a period of obsequious supplication, it acquiesces and emancipates my floral urine: a stern and furious jet erupts in all directions, a sprinkler out of control, a hose without a nozzle.

There is the loneliness, of course.

Opposing a flourishing jardinière, or an ivy covered fire hydrant - I am alone, the kind of privacy that comes with windswept nudity and public intimate acts. This is the solitude of a rebel about to be caught, an act of utter self-destruction as meaningful as farting or ejaculating in a whore who's bored to the point of distraction. In short: the angst.

I pee in existential window boxes.

Regarding the pots themselves - I am indifferent.

I am pretty certain that I expel not on the containers but on the life that they contain. I urinate on growth itself and not on the confines of its development. I am capable of peeing on houseplants wherever they may be. I did it in elevators and on

standpipes, around hedges, and in our pristine rooms - my former wife's and mine.

Long ago, I passed urine in an empty classroom in my school where they wasted mornings grooming dim-witted girls to be ineffectual secretaries. That was my first exposure and aberrant liquefaction. I used a desiccated little pot. Truth be told, I was not to blame. The janitor locked me in without allowing for my incontinent bladder, the consequence of chronic prostatitis from early adolescence.

Thus incarcerated among the minacious rows of electric typewriters, I did what I had to do on the turf of the schoolroom's only flowerpot. I spent two blissful months of cooped up afternoons there, typing my finals thesis about the last days of Adolf Hitler.

As my book-length paper progressed, the classroom reeked of stale excretions. The plant first shrivelled, changing its colour from dusty khaki to limpid yellow and then to screaming orange. It was only a short way from there to the familiar brown-spotted murk that accompanied the grounded shrub's desperate contortions, attempting to evade the daily acidic chastisement I meted out.

At last, it twisted around itself, in a herbal agonising whirl, and froze. It became a stump, a remnant, the arid memory of an erstwhile plant. It formed a tiny cavity that whistled with the breeze. It assumed the air of parchment, increasingly translucent as I further drenched it.

It was the first time I witnessed the intricacies of death in action. Being at hand, I was its main or only agent, the first and sole determinant of its triumph over life. I meticulously documented each convolution of the inferior organism. I realised that few can reliably recount the withering of a plant in such conditions. Its wilting is bound to elude the finest of detectives if he refuses to acknowledge my sodden contribution.

This was, indeed, the point: an opportunity to murder, replete with the attendant pleasures of a protracted torturing to death - and still to be absolved.

Are you upset?

Then ask yourselves: what shocks you in the passing of a flower in a classroom thirty years ago?

You have no ready answer.

Lately, I adopted this novel habit of peeing in foreign toilets, around the bowls, creating fizzing ponds on shimmering floors. I half expect the tiles to yellow and to bronze and then to rarefy

into limpidity. But porcelain is more resilient than certain forms of life. It keenly feeds on urine. It's not the way to go. Must find another venue to explore that wet frisson.

I exit lavatories engrossed in mourning, dejected, nostalgia-inundated.

I heave myself onto a leathery love seat and crumble, an embryo ensconced. I must completely reconsider I know not what, till when, what purpose to this contemplation. At least the rabid dousing of flower pots is meaningful - I pee, therefore I kill.

But this incomprehensible trot from john to armchair and back appears to be the wrong trajectory. On the other hand, I found no other path and an internal voice keeps warning me to delve no deeper.

I gather that my wife has left a while back. She used to wonder why the plants in our apartment expire soon and many. She changed the fading vegetation, never the dying earth. Not having heard her questions (and the plants being untouched), I conclude, with a fair amount of certainty, that she is gone.

No point in peeing into pots whose plants are dead. My wife would have enjoyed the metaphor. She says that what you see with me is never what you get. I find it difficult to imagine what she would have said had she known about my disposal habits. It would have fit her theory about me, for sure.

At any rate, I am not inclined to water urns whose flowers withered. Unholy urine, such as mine, is most unlikely to effect a resurrection.

I religiously wash my hands after the act. This might be considered out of character as I owned up to peeing whichever way, on plants and other objects. Sometimes the wind messes up the stream and sprays me teasingly. I cannot always shower and scouring my palms is kind of a ritual: "see you, after all, I am purged."

I miss my wife, the malleable folds of creamy skin I used to nibble.

Now there is no one I can peck and the flat is constantly in dusk. I am unable - really, unwilling - to get off the lounge I dragged to the entrance of the toilet. I wish I had someone I could gnaw at. Coming to think of it, my wife would have been interested in the details of my soggy deviance. But I am pretty certain that she would have been the only one. And, even so, her curiosity would have been mild at best. Or non-existent, now that she has vanished.

I cleanse my hands again. It's safer. One never knows the mischief of the winds. Why should I risk the inadvertent introduction of my waste into my mouth while eating?

When my wife informed me she is bailing out of our depressing life, she insisted that I was the first to abandon her. She accused me of emotional absenteeism. I was in the throes of a particularly gratifying leak on the undergrowth around a crimson fireplug. The oxblood soil, now frothy laced, aflame, the setting sun.

I placed the call to her naively. She bid farewell, her voice was steel, and she was gone.

I instantly grasped the stark futility of any war I'd wage to bring her back. I also knew it'll never be the same, peeing on plants. I am bound to remember her and what and how she said, the frightful burn, that swoon. I must have turned yellow-pale, then brown-orange, and putrefactive arteries have sprung throughout me. I couldn't do a thing but writhe under her sentence.

The muffled sounds of cars from outside. Some people tell the make by distant rumbles: deep bass, stentorian busses, the wheezing buzz of compacts. I play this guessing game no longer. I understand now that the phone won't ring, that the house is empty, that there is nothing to revive a shrivelled shrub, immersed in urine, implanted in ammoniac soil.

I think about the last days of Hitler: how he roamed his underground bunker with imagined ulcers, poisoning his beloved canines, his birthday party, and how he wed his mistress the day before the twain committed suicide.

How they were both consumed by fire.

This was the topic of my dissertation when I urinated for the first time in a flowerpot, in my childhood high school, in my forlorn birth town, so long ago. I had no choice. The school's caretaker locked me in.

And this is what I wrote:

How two get married knowing they will soon be dead and how it matters not to them. They exterminate the dogs and chew on cyanide, having instructed everyone beforehand regarding the disposal of their bodies. And then the shot.

Their last few days I studied in those early days of mine. Their last few days.

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# The Future of Madeleine

by Sam Vaknin

Read the [Hebrew original](#).

Madeleine lodged us in a tiny cubicle at the end of a corridor. Her establishment is all tidy and neat, but miniature. Madeleine's doll house, this hotel. At dawn, she rises and fixes a basic breakfast in the ground floor kitchenette. Scents of bacon and fried eggs waft through the building and shifts change at the reception desk, the weary loudly welcoming their alert replacements.

Madeleine takes note with gravity of the report submitted by the outgoing crew and updates the incomers with its details. Her make-up always fresh, her hair fluffy, her attire impeccable and stainless. Her sexuality harnessed by a prim-looking business suit, her lipstick an insinuated crimson.

Eli blinks at the sun and shields his eyes under a sinewy arm, flanked by two thick and raven eyebrows.

"They should pass a law" - he argues to no one in particular - "People ought to work by night and sleep throughout the day. Let the nocturnal be diurnal and vice versa."

The same sentence every tortured awakening. His ostentatious misery provokes contagious mirth in both of us. We go hysterical among the crumpled sheets, beating the shrunken pillows with our fists (his outsizing mine). At long last, Eli gets up and goes to shave and shower in the nude.

I am not embarrassed. Straddling the minuscule bath tub, I mutter:

"We are penniless."

"Yes, I am aware of it" - sighs Eli and whips the sink with lathered razor. He uses his fleshy backhand to wipe the frothy mirror. Pressing his nostrils upwards, ham-handed, he shaves the cobalt patches of his nascent beard and whiskers.

"I got myself a sucker for a backgammon match. He is from Iran. Was a Minister of labour or agriculture or something like that..." - he hisses a curse and cleanses a pearl of blood from prominent chin.

"What else?" - I enquire offhandedly. I know Eli well. He is too calm.

"Listen" - he enthuses as though the idea just budded in his mind - "there is this Jewish cardiologist, filthy rich, Marc. He lives all by himself in a six-room apartment in the sixteenth arrondissement. I introduced him to this chick and now they are getting hitched."

I keep my peace, awaiting the dénouement. Eli eyes me slyly:

"I told him you are a genius and that we are planning a convention of Sephardim in Israel, sponsored by Itzhak Navon, the former president. It set him on fire."

I cross my legs and inspect closely a bloodied mole embedded in my thigh.

"What have you got there?" - enquires Eli - "Anyhow, this guy is loaded, I am telling you. We can easily fleece him for five grand or more for the consultancy we are planning on opening here, in Paris. Add to this my cousin's money and the dough from the dentist and that computer guy - and we are in business."

"If it survives your gambling" - I interject tranquilly.

"You are such a doomsayer!" - Eli fumes, banging the bathroom door behind him.

A minute later, smirking - "Remember the wife of the Sorbonne professor at yesterday's dinner?" - I nod - "She called me this morning. She wants to interview me for a WIZO newsletter, or some such. I told her the only way to quiz me is on my bed, in my hotel room. She laughed and said that this is how she conducts all her assignments anyhow" - marvels Eli - "So, take a walk, knock back some coffee, munch on a croissant or something."

There is a cramped restaurant on the intersection, up the street, opposite the Military Academy. Every afternoon, for months now, I eat my duck in garlic there. Sometimes, Eli and I adopt this mock Swedish accent and demand the most improbable of dishes, barely able to contain our hilarity. The tortured waiters shun us.

Now, waiting for a table to clear, I bury my head in giant mug of greasy coffee replete with floating isles of pastry. Then back to the hotel in a deliberate slow motion.

Eli is sitting on a chair, bare feet on window ledge. The bed a muddle of ejaculated sheets. He casts a sluggish glance in my direction, upheaves, and dresses perfunctorily.

"I fixed with Marc. He is waiting for us. Don't start with petulant expressions and your usual brattiness. Be nice, we can no longer afford even our morning coffee."

A scarface Vietnamese with a tintinnabulary dialect minds the reception desk in the deserted lobby. Eli looks disappointed but mumbles "morning". We stroll towards the nearest metro station down the street.

Marc's spacious abode is in a newly renovated building. Bareness reverberates through six high-ceilinged rooms. The hulking cardiologist lives in the kitchen. He butchers meditatively a silver herring wrapped in a slab of putrid cheese laid on an ageing slice of bread. He licks lubricious swollen fingers, extending them for handshake, and smacks his fleshy lips.

"Sit down, please" - he utters cordially - "You're welcome!" His Hebrew, guttural and broken. Though somewhat stooping, Marc has the countenance of a Belmondo. Eli attacks the remnants of the kipper, stuffing his face with staling crumbs. "Where's Mazal?" - he enquires, between the mouthfuls, dodging digested scraps.

Masticating, Marc responds:

"She suddenly took off. She said she couldn't stand it here."

There follows a duet of smarmy nibbles, the unctuous morsels of a feigned alliance and selfish solidarity, the smutty autopsy of smoke-dried, gutted love.

Eli assures him: "I will get her back to you" - and Marc embarks on careful planning, strategy and tactics of the reconquista - when Mazal steps indoors. A vague air of long lost familiarity, a memorable face - the curving forehead, dark ponds for eyes, a boxer's nose.

"Marc" - she exclaims.

Sheathed in a hail of breadcrumbs and disintegrating cheese, the ursine pilgrim approaches her: "Mazal!"

They do not touch each other, not even the customary kiss on cheek. Mazal says: "I am going to put my things in the bedroom" - and smiles at me.

Eli coughs politely:

"Marc, we will leave you, guys, alone. Be a man, won't you? Show your love, woo her, be romantic. A woman is not a cow, to mount, to screw, and then to turn your back on and go to sleep. A woman needs attention, flowers, a restaurant and orchestra on her birthday, buy her a fresh dress here and there. Plunge your hand in your pocket. Be stingy and die lonely!"

Marc assents despondently, his eyes riveted to Mazal's swaying buttocks.

"Marc" - implores Eli - "let's finish this business with the money. To establish the firm, I must deposit it in the bank this afternoon."

Marc casts a haunted, ensnared glance at Eli's general direction.

But Eli strikes relentlessly:

"Marc, she'll be out of the room any minute now. If we keep arguing over these stinking five thousand dollars, you will lose her forever. Either you're in or you're out. The time to decide is here and now."

"I'm in, I'm in" - stammers Marc, defeated. He noisily dodders to the adjacent room. Eli winks at me expectantly. Marc returns with a bulky wad of cash and a stained, much folded, piece of rubricated paper.

"Sign this, both you" - he growls and, mournfully, to himself: "fifty thousand francs."

"A mere five thousand dollars" - Eli corrects him - "and the money doubles each half a year or so. Welcome, partner!"

Marc reciprocates with a feeble handshake and crumbles onto a kitchen stool. The flickering neon light weighs on his luxuriant eyelids, skirting the shady folds under his sockets. Eli bows and whispers hoarsely in our sponsor's hirsute ear: "Go to her, Marc. She is waiting for you. She is a woman."

Marc gestures half-heartedly but doesn't budge. Eli shrugs disparagingly and signals me to follow him.

Back in the street, he gleefully observes:

"She'll never stay with him."

We promenade in silence and then:

"It's five thousand US dollars we made today! We earned ourselves a normal lunch for a change. I haven't eaten properly since all those bets."

Eli used to wager meals in fine eateries on the outcomes of a quiz. The terms were thus: the dupe he lured could ask me ten questions which I correctly answered. I, in my turn, would then perplex the prey with a single, insoluble, challenge. I never lost. But when I won from Eli his platinum tie clip and pair of cufflinks, the betting stopped.

A tangled web of avenues and squares, the foliated daubs of green and orange, the ash-clad buildings eerily aglow. Swirling bouquets of men in women, hormone-exuding teens, whores and their clients are negotiating seed. Paris perspires lust under the seething sun.

The corner drugstore is congested. Eli devours the headlines of a week-old Israeli paper. He doesn't even notice Mayer who occupies a seat beside him. His lips give shape to writhing syllables. Mayer regards his efforts with nauseated fascination.

"Eli" - I exclaim - "Look who is here! If it isn't Mayer!"



"Mayer!" - Eli wrinkles the daily - "What are you doing here? When did you arrive? Care for a little backgammon match?"

Mayer sneers, his bellows chest pulsating. With effeminate hand, he smears the effluence of the mall's tropic micro-climate on his balding head.

"You are still the same, you piece of shit" - he roars and they embrace affectionately.

Eli and Mayer are always in the throes of some conspiracy and I stay in the room, deterred by the metropolitan expanse, leafing through an illustrated French encyclopaedia. Madeleine intrudes infrequently, ostensibly to enquire of my needs, but really to find out if Eli had returned.

I pity her. I say:

"Eli met a friend of his from Israel. His name is Mayer."

She snorts bitterly and hangs up on my compassion.

Eli and Mayer stagger into the hotel at night, with fur-packed beauties hanging on their arms. Up, in the room, Eli points a stubby finger and enquires: "How much to do this guy?" - they gauge me unappreciatively and mumble something. Eli and Mayer burst into convulsive merriment.

Eli continues, exhaling heavily: "And that includes his dog?"

The girls recoil, torrentially blaspheming, and fling their imitation leather purses at the now much-bolted door.

Their voices fade along the corridor and up the creaking stairs.

I am left alone, in thought, pierced by their assaying gaze, when Eli breaks into the room, stark-naked, and drags me to the floor above.

"Come, come!" - he hastens me - "You mustn't miss this! Two stunners making it. This is something you have never seen before, I bet!"

"I don't want to!" - I whisper, prying my shoulder loose from his clammy vise - "Leave me alone!" - and I retreat, scuttling, to the safety of the landing.

"You are a nutcase, that's what you are!" - Eli now pelts me from his elevated perch - "Even a homosexual would be excited! Such knockouts, a ton of breasts, exquisite asses, that's what you are missing, you hear me?"

By morning his wrath subsides. Casting a waxy arm over his fluttering eyes, he blocks the fervid light and croaks:

"They should pass a law."

"Where's Mayer?" - I enquire.

"Up in the room" - he giggles - "Stuck with the whores. They claim to have been nurses in a hospital. When he revives, he will have to pay them" - he finds it side-splitting.

"Madeleine was looking for you" - I informed him and added - "Many times." I evaded his scolding stare, turning the pages in my book in the wrong direction.

"What did you tell her?" - he rasps.

"Nothing whatsoever."

"And she?"

"Said none."

"We will visit her this evening" - Eli decrees and drops the subject altogether.

A few minutes later:

"Stay here" - he exits and locks the door behind him.

I contemplate the wooden planks that stand between me and the hallway and ruffle the pages of my book. When I rise to fill my cup with water from the corner sink, the walls reverberate with Mayer's blows.

"Where is the son of a bitch?" - he bawls - "Wait till I lay my hands on him!"

"He is not here. He descended earlier." Mayer digests the information and then attacks the doorknob viciously. "Is he inside? He locked you in?" - suspicion-impregnated pause - "Open the door! You won't?"

"He locked me in, he's gone, I have no key, I cannot open up" - and Mayer curses audibly. He is suddenly besieged by agitated female voices and tries to weave his tattered French into a sentence. The sounds recede as, having yielded, he climbs to the cubicle, apparently to recompense them.

By now the hotel is virtually deserted of its guests and of their echoes. Time is marked by the cheerful banter of the staff, some heated arguments, the weary vacuuming of carpets, the squeaky linen trolley. The equanimity of the eternal. Bathed in anaemic light, I watch my legs and arm, propped on a thickset book, with growing alienation. When Eli unlocks the door, he, too, does not belong. Not an invader but an error, the wrong protagonist of an unfinished novel.

Failing to pierce the dusk, he blinks his way towards the light switch and beats it into brightness. He eyes me intensely, his rare but most inspiring insect. "Get dressed. We need to be at Madeleine's in half an hour." A feline leap into the bathroom and Eli, urinates, legs wide apart, the door ajar, letting out the hissing voice and pungent smell of fizzing pee.

Still steeped in unreality, I kneel. From battered suitcase, tucked under the bed, I extract a rumpled blazer, age-patinated pants. "Put on cravat!" - he snaps - "She is not a floozy, has a lot of style" - he sounds proud. I don a necktie.

"Now listen up" - Eli expounds - "I told her about you, she thinks you are a demigod. She is convinced that you can tell the future. A few things about her: she is widowed, rich, and lonely. She has a Turkish paramour, a yachtsman. He works the Paris line and ends here once a month."

"What does he look like?" - I probe and Eli, violently revolted, unfurls my tie knot and motions me to start anew.

"Tall, swarthy, beefy, moustache. She is addicted to me. She wants me to move over to her place."

"I realise that" - I retort, irritably - "I am not blind, you know."

The taxi crawls into a murky parking lot and Eli and I sneak towards the glass paned entrance and press the intercom. Madeleine buzzes us in immediately, no questions asked. Silhouetted against the backlit doorframe, extended arm on jamb, she is carved into her wavy gown. Eli pecks her turned cheek and brushes against her nipples. I do not.

She doesn't even wait for us to settle down, thrusting her palm forward, digits outspread, under my flushing face. Her robe unravels some, hinting at ample, creamy breasts.

"Give me a reading" - she commands me hoarsely. I notice now her layered makeup, the sweat ravines and mascara pools, shaven abrasions where chin meets neck.

I contemplate her tiny hand, curvaceous, and say:

"I see a man."

"Who is he?" - she prods with bated breath - "How does he look and what is our future?"

"A towering man of dark complexion..." - a built-in hesitation, the vision blurring, Eli and I have practiced this on many women, a tiresome routine. I close my eyes, waggle my head, clasp knees in helplessness, writhe for a while, exhale:

"He wears a fine moustache. I see great waters..."

She yelps in fear and joy.

"You are two lovers... A boat, he is on it ... and the sea..."

Eli suppresses yawns, but Madeleine vaults into her bedroom, barefooted thumps on tiled floor. These fleshy thuds arouse. She reappears and kneels beside me, scattering purplish Polaroids on a nearby coffee table.

"That's him" - she pinkie-indicates a snapshot - "In Turkey, Istanbul..."

Her scent is primal, her neck too short but sculpted, she moistens lips with lithe, inviting tongue.

Eli boasts of me: "You see, what did I tell you? There's nothing he don't know, he see it all, a genius, he is the talk of every town in Israel..."

"You must have told him in advance" - Madeleine pouts and lays a shapely arm on Eli's thigh. Hair sprouts shaggy in her cavernous armpit.

"I swear to you I haven't!" - Eli withdraws, offended.

"Your father took you when you were a child" - I startle both, reading the headlines of an inner bulletin unfolding - "You conceived his child and then aborted. I hear the baby whimpering."

For one delirious moment, they both appraise me, shocked, albeit for different reasons.

"What did you say?" - Eli recovers first but Madeleine shrieks, reduced to a blubbing heap of mouth and shoulders. The muted violence of buried words tears at her body. She rends the carpet and vainly reconstructs it. Still sobbing mutely, Eli consoles her impotently, casting condemning glances my way as though exclaiming "Look what you have done!"

Madeleine is quieter now but welled-up ripples traverse her crouching figure.

She whispers something and Eli puts an ear to quavering lips. Another hiss and Eli lays an incidental hand on Madeleine's heaving chest and counter-whispers. A lengthy verbal intercourse ensues. She nods assent and Eli jumps, enthused.

"Join me today to see something you haven't seen in your entire life!"

With Eli this could only mean sex but something in his voice forbids me to refuse, an ominous promise, a kind of incest. Madeleine strolls dreamily into her bedroom and emerges moulded into a mustard toga and silver stiletto heels. Under the flowing robe, she is ensconced in nylon tights and a bikini top.

We drive through fluoresced, abandoned boulevards, awash with rustling leaves. A car or two speeds by, the metro stations gargle. Madeleine's numb face is ravaged by the intermittence of the lights. Her lifeless hands clutch at the steering wheel and hardly turn it left or right.

"It's here" - says Eli.

We descend few stairs to face a peeping hole embedded in a metal door which Eli raps. A mushroomed eye appears, withdraws, the gate is opened by a decaying woman, a brownish cigarette

holder dangling from scarlet orifice. She motions us in with remnant grace.

We deposit overcoats and bags in a tucked-in wardrobe and negotiate a red-lit passageway into a bar. It's crowded. The patrons, slumped in upholstered armchairs and facing round glass-tops, are catered to by bow-tied waiters. These take their orders, serve them, replace the over-spilling ashtrays, collect the checks, and smile profusely at the favoured clients.

Eli shoves me towards a giant curtain.

"Cent-six" - he sounds awed - "One hundred and six. This is the address and the name of this establishment. The bar is merely cover. You could call it a hundred and five" - he tsks and snickers gruffly, his hand engirdling Madeleine's waist. Her eyes are distant now, her hair atypically dishevelled. Skimpy clothes askew, her chalky body flares into the haze.

Eli rams his tailor's dummy toward the draped partition. He lets her pass and follows. I join them in a musky, clouded room. The light is dim, the cubicle immersed in droning chatter. Eli directs attention to the furthest corner: "She comes here every day. She must consume a bucketful of sperm."

A woman's head is bobbing in a virile loin, with one hand she is kneading his erupting masculinity, the other rubs another's member. Right next to them, a female self-impales on hoary groin. Eli drives Madeleine to the centre, disrobes and strips her of her vestments with rapid sleight of hand.

She stands there, nude voluptuousness, uneasy feet and fistful palms, her eyes occluded. She breathes tortuously. Eli fondles her breasts and passes a lustful hand between her legs. Others approach and taste her hesitatingly. Five minutes later, she vanishes under a pack of males, tree branch obscured by bee hives. Only her toes are visible, bouncing, contracting, flexed and still, fanned and convergent. Men rise, wiping off semen and others take their steamy place. Men on her breasts, men on her limbs, men in her orifices.

A tall, dark woman invites me to a party. I decline, she shrugs and proposes to another. I fall asleep.

Eli stirs me awake.

"Let's go home" - he croaks. He rubs a pair of bloodshot eyes between two fingers.

"Where is Madeleine?" - I cover my mouth to arrest the morning odours.

"She is gone" - says Eli, ireful - "She went home and so should we. Come on."

It is a lengthy, silent stride to our hotel. Eli stops by the reception desk, as though awaiting someone.

Back in the room, he asks:

"How did you know about her father? He really mounted her when she was young."

"I didn't know. It sometimes happens. I can't control it."

Eli regards me sceptically and plunges to the bed, fully-attired. He rests his head on interlocking hands and canvasses the slanted ceiling. Then he turns on his side and begs:

"Please read my palm."

"Stop it, Eli. I am exhausted. It's been a long day. Anyhow I am bluffing, it's a charade, a con, a trick. You of all people should know that."

"Please divine my future" - Eli pleads, alarmed - "I have a feeling something real bad is going to happen soon."

I hold his massive palm in mine and study the sooty definite creeks that cross and intersect.

"You are losing your wife these very days" - I pronounce, almost inaudibly - "You are in Paris and she is no longer yours back home."

"What did you say, speak up, I am telling you!" - Eli panics.

"You are losing Zehava, OK? Now will you let me be?" - I shrill and keep grumbling - "You have already lost her, she is no longer yours", until I drop off.

I wake into the cadaverous silence of an early afternoon. Madeleine is on the phone:

"Samuel" - her voice is as imperious and decisive as ever - "Eli departed in the morning. Went back to Israel. Some kind of family emergency, he said."

I wait.

"I ask you to leave this hotel" - she carries on - "You owe me nothing, you don't have to pay. I will settle the accounts with Eli when he is back. I simply want you out of here this instant."

Sleep-drunk, exuding tar and alcohol, I petition her:

"Where will I go?"

"There's a small inn on the Left Bank. I reserved a room for you, it's cheap."

She hangs up on me.

I am in the midst of hurried packing when Eli calls:

"Shmuel" - his voice is crackling static, dim, and foreign - "Zehava has someone. She wants a divorce and to take the kids. I feel like a boatman who has lost his oars, the bitch. I go to Paris to make a living, to create a business for our future, and she whores around..."

I gently place the sizzling receiver on the bed and drag my book-laden suitcase to the corridor and then, thunderously, down the spiral staircase.

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# The Out Kid

by Sam Vaknin

Sima was six years old when she died. Mother turned off the television and instructed me to go to my grandma's home at once. It was that time of day between retiring sunlight and emerging gloom. My grandmother was sobbing silently, seated gingerly on a shabby couch, her face buried in an oversized and crumpled handkerchief. My grandpa, muted, just hugged her close. It all reminded me of a Passover Eve, refreshments strewn on tables, hastily appended by my uncles and covered with flowery rags.

All lights were on, tarring the wiry tree in the garden with juddering shadows. I sat in the corner, thinking about Sima, wondering if her beauty survived her death. They said she had leukemia and vomited blood incessantly. She died, awash with it, her pallid face depressed against my grandpa's shoulder. I pondered if it was right to go on loving her. I thought about Uzi, her brother and my cousin.

After the funeral, Uzi was sent to a Kibbutz, never to return, leaving behind unfinished cowboy-and-Indian games on my grandmother's verandah. There were so many things I had to tell him but he was gone.

A few months later, my aunt invited me to join her to visit the Kibbutz. In her youth, she was a green-eyed, lithe beauty - cascading, raven hair and my mother's cheekbones, but gentler. She divorced still young and then Sima died on her and she found employment in Haifa, in a hospice for the terminally ill.

She was a recluse, living in a tiny, viewless flat which she compulsively scoured and polished. She spared her words and I was deterred by these and other eccentricities. But I wanted to see Uzi again and talk to him, as we used to. I imagined his full-cheeked laughter and the sparkle in his eyes, under his curls.

So, I said I'll come along and found myself, one summer morning, accompanying my aunt to the Kibbutz, a winding, dusty way. We switched countless buses and sipped orange juice through straws and my aunt tilted her wide-brimmed hat to expose a lock of



greying hair. Her eyes were moist. She said: "I am going to see my Uzi now. It's been so long." The sun invaded her fedora, imprisoning her quavering lips behind a beaming grid.

I wanted to enquire why did she send Uzi to the Kibbutz to start with and tell her how I missed his smile, our games, the bucket loads of water he would pour on me after we bathed in the nearby sea. But I refrained because her eyes went metal when she mentioned him. She never even mentioned Sima.

So, there we were, standing at the gate, she and I and our gear, all packed in fading plastic bags at our feet, enshrouded by the black vapour of the shimmering asphalt and the roaring and receding bus. My aunt, contemplating the waning transport, grabbed my sweaty palm and lifted the rustling shopping bags. A whiskered driver of a tractor regarded us with curiosity, then guided us to our destination.

My aunt clenched a childish fist to tap the door, but left it hanging in mid-air awhile. Then, she let it drop, an alien appendage. She removed her hat, clinging to it awkwardly, straightened the wrinkles in her dress and gazed at her flat patent shoes uncomfortably. She knocked on the outer screen rigidly and the sounds reverberated in the house like distant thunder.

The door was opened so instantly that we recoiled. My aunt stared at the middle-aged woman and returned her barely audible "hello". It was as though her body shrunk. She undulated with her baggage eagerly. The older woman's lips were smiling at my aunt, but her eyes remained on guard.

She told me to look for Uzi in the animal corner, close to the mountain, among the cowsheds and cages. She needs to talk to my aunt in private, she ventured unnecessarily.

She softly shut the door behind me and I stood, dazed by the scorching sun. Barefoot and well-tanned kids, clad in shorts and T-shirts, surrounded and studied me and I reciprocated. I froze and they did not get closer. We formed two groups and measured one another.

A bird-like girl broke the spell: "Are you a new Out Kid?"

I didn't know what was an Out Kid. I told her that I was Uzi's cousin and that I am searching for him.

She gave a toothy smile, crossed the invisible barrier and held my trembling hand: "Let's go". She examined me, astounded, when I withdrew and violently extracted myself from her grasp.

We silently traversed some green-hedged paths. Brown signs with massive yellow lettering were everywhere. She navigated deftly among the gravel and the fences until we reached a bank of

crates, laid on the sun-parched ground and hosting rabbits. Their wheezy, ribbed breathing nearly unstitched their fur.

Uzi was standing there, his back to us. He leaned his head on an extended arm, supported by the cage's frame, perusing a frightened rodent, whose nostrils twitched with desperation.

I called out: Uzi! He turned around listlessly and looked at me, as though unsure of my identity. My guide hopped from one dainty foot to another, her discomfiture increasing. Finally she departed and joined the growing bunch of children that monitored us from afar.

"It is a porcupine" - said Uzi, his eyes averted. "I tend to it and to the entire animal corner. We have sheep and horses, too" - he hugged the circumference with a bronzed gesticulation. "I climb the mountain daily with my father" - he added. I kept silent. His real father deserted him when he was toddler.

Uzi grew quiet, too. He kicked a pile of dry manure and asked me if I want to see the cows and I said I did and off we went. It was like in the olden days, when he and Sima and myself strolled down the white-hot pavements. She had an auburn mane she locked into a ponytail, her mother's eyes, green tarns, a swan's own neck. She made us laugh at the unexpected femininity of her most childish enquiries.

Then and there, with Uzi by my side, it was as nothing happened, a midsummer's nightmare, when you wake, perspiring, but in a familiar bed.

We talked profusely and laughed and I inevitably dived into some straw-infested fertilizer and didn't mind at all because Uzi was with me to pour large bucketfuls of glacial water he carried from a nearby stream. I closed my eyes and pretended to be at sea, to have brought along the spraying waves and the caressing breeze, a gift to Uzi, and a reminder.

The native kids just followed us, their eyes azure, their skins a seamless copper. They tracked our movements with naked, strapping bodies and clean-smelling hair. They clung to us and giggled secretly and pointed at Uzi and whispered in each other's elfin ears, and then they chuckled.

Uzi said not a word. He passed a soothing hand on a horse's muzzle and a cow's leg and the pulsating furs of bunnies. He gently pulled their elongated ears and they scurried to and fro and made him laugh. He had a gurgling, erupting laughter, Uzi had.

We climbed a thorny, stone-filled road atop a hill, pausing to look at the vanishing Kibbutz at our feet. "There's my home" - Uzi singled out a cubicle. I wasn't sure which one he meant, but I did

not insist. I only looked at the hazy greenery and at the gleaming swimming pool and said: "Let's go down, I am worn out."

The children awaited our descent and cried at Uzi, who ignored them. He only hastened his steps and so did I. They followed us. Surrounded, stranded on a tiny path, we stopped. They shoved Uzi and pulled.

"Who is he?" - they demanded - "Why did he come here? Where is he from?"

He frowned and said: "It's no one special. He just came with my mother from over there" - with a vague gesture to indicate the nowhere.

The girl fixed me with her gaze.

"It's nothing, it's no one! He is only here for a visit, I am telling you!" - Uzi pleaded.

"He must return where he came from" - said one of them, his eye a cold blue sparkle. His jaws rippled as he spoke, skin smooth and dry. My shirt was dabbled in sweat and hung, keeled over, from my thick, long trousers. "Let him go back" - echoed the girl - "We cannot have another one of you. Isn't it enough that you gorge on our food and have new parents?"

Uzi was soundless, his head lowered. I couldn't look into his eyes like we used to do when we were sad. Sima and I had this game of who would be the first to stare down the other with an invincible, metallic look. Deep inside, I thought, this must be how Uzi sees them - as enemies to be stared down and out and away.

One kid approached and tugged him at the shoulder and Uzi stooped. It was as if a valve was drawn, the air let out, to render a misshapen Uzi. Another child stepped forcefully on Uzi's earth-baked, sweat-furrowed toes. His breath mingled with his quarry's as he increased the pressure. Uzi's face contorted but he didn't budge.

Jaded and starved they left and we proceeded to Uzi's new abode, amidst the well-trimmed lawns and neck-high hedges. He knocked hesitantly and someone let us in. Uzi erupted in bitter sobbing, beating his sides with pale-clenched fists. He stood there, squealing and grunting, like the animals in his corner and the muffled sounds filled the house and washed over the bowl of fruits and the heavy, murky curtains, and the antique wooden furniture, rebounding, a thousand echoes.

My aunt called his name. His new parents entered the kitchenette and sealed the sliding door. I had nowhere else to be. "I brought you some food" - said the mother and he nodded bravely and brushed aside the tears that threatened to emerge. She

opened the overflowing plastic bags with learned helplessness, displaying pastries she prepared at home.

But Uzi selected a mid-size orange and peeled it expertly, stuffing his mouth as he progressed. The orphaned pies adorned the table that stood between them. They both avoided looking at each other. Still with diverted eyes she extended an uncertain hand and touched his shoulder. He shrank under her stroke, so she withdrew and sat up, tense, straddling the edge of a recliner.

Thus, they circled one another wearily. A longcase clock ticked minutes and then hours before my aunt got up, mauling her wide-brimmed hat, and said: "I must be going now", and Uzi nodded, devouring yet another orange. He didn't even rise to bid farewell.

"I'll come to visit you" - she promised but her pledge sounded tinny and rehearsed. Uzi consumed the fruit and stared intently at the floor. His mother took my soiled palm in hers and exited the house. No one escorted us to the gate or to the grimy station. We stood there, in the sweltering sun, until we heard the bus, uproarious, like echoes of a far-off battle.

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# Pierre's Friends

by Sam Vaknin

Pierre is terrified. Not hard to tell. The bald patches on his egg-shaped skull exude pearly sweat from sooty pores, a salty path down to his darkening collar. He thrusts two alcohol-swollen fingers and loosens his shabby necktie. His bloodshot eyes dart from one grimy corner of the restaurant to another, avoiding Eli's.

The three of us are seated awkwardly on the porch of an unfashionable eatery, crinkling the paper menus. Pierre orders an espresso. Eli and I dismiss the hovering waiter impatiently. So now, Pierre sips his lukewarm swill as we observe him closely. He coughs, expelling coffee grounds all over. We don't recoil. He chokes.

Only the day before it was my turn to writhe. I landed in the minuscule and gleaming airport, picked up my battered suitcase, and tailed the passport control procession. Throughout it all, I couldn't stop shivering.

A uniformed officer of the Border Police leafed gravely through my documents, comparing them to a neatly printed list. He picked up the receiver of an antiquated phone and tugged at its snaky cord. I strained to overhear the words that may condemn me.

But the inevitable cannot be hastened. I stood there, a rabbit caught in legal headlights on time's highway, awaiting the terminal collision with my life. I watched mayhem unfold, as each official summoned others to consult.

At last I was approached and asked with firm civility to accompany a prim official to a cubicle. He placed himself behind a rickety table but offered me no seat. I remained standing. He then proceeded to inaudibly recite the questions printed on a faded form and I responded.

He leaned back and demanded to know in which hotel I had reserved a room. I told him. It was a small establishment proffering basic services. He nodded approvingly: I must be a solid, thrifty person to have chosen such accommodation. It sort of placed us both, despite his social inferiority, on equal footing.

He solemnly informed me, in ominously florid phraseology, that I am the subject of a full investigation whose gravity cannot be overestimated. He asked me not to leave town - or even my hotel - till it is over. Do I fully understand, he queried. I nodded brusquely and noted the gleeful smirk with which he handed back my passport, duly stamped.

I hailed a yellow cab and helped its driver stow my baggage in the trunk. Around a flowery mound, we headed straight to town and to my lodgings.

The first thing I did was place a call to Eli. Surprisingly, it was he who picked up the phone.

He heard my convoluted tale - I felt his gathering gloom - asked several questions and concluded:

"Your place, tonight."

Still listening to the dial tone, I lay across the bed and contemplated the blotchy ceiling, projecting overflowing fears into the aqueous blots.

Eli will be here, I could count on him, he loved me as a son, a twin, a soul mate. We were complementary: I only knew about things that he experienced. I couldn't capture him in words like "streetwise". Eli was life itself: innocuously cruel, indifferently relentless, single-mindedly propagative, amoral, steeped in gallows humour.

My employer insisted that Pierre admitted to a conspiracy to pass on weighty secrets - commercial and political - to the press. He swept aside my vehement protestations and railed at me for wanting to destroy his business empire, his life's achievement. Pierre confessed in the police interrogation, he seethed.

It was now up to an investigating magistrate to decide whether to indict us both.

I knotted my tie the way Eli taught me and donned a jacket. Bathed in a springtime sun, I headed towards the flower clock near the marina by the lake. It ticked away its scented, multicoloured time in pensive melancholy. I felt forlornly relieved. Whatever the outcome of the proceedings, I knew this chapter ends.

I recalled myself facing this timepiece on my first day in town - diminutive and lost, clad in a cut-price suit of itchy blue with golden stripes. I had it custom-made in the West Bank. I enviously sneaked furtive glances at the ubiquitous tall, well-tailored, Aryan men who roamed the streets.

In time, I, too, improved attire. My climb was meteoric: department head, division chief, then two divisions, vice

president. I became a welcome guest in the hoary mountaintops and charmed castles of the world's affluent and mighty.

I mulled four years of images while genteelly strolling down the promenade, unfastening my necktie and nibbling at a colossal ice cream cone. At last, I flung my reefer on one shoulder, stuffing the stifling tie in an inside pocket. Unshackled, though officially confined, I hummed a tune and drifted aimlessly.

Back at the hotel, Eli, submerged in a strategically-situated lounge, leafed through the oversized pages of a local rag. He rose with difficulty from his seat and embraced me warmly. Disengaging, he scrutinised me, his two hands on my shoulders. And then another hug.

Sipping Campari orange, Eli attentively listened to my story. His fleshy palms wriggled involuntarily in the more stirring passages, as if to illustrate his mental notes. When I was through, he sighed: "We will extricate you from this mess."

I handed over Pierre's phone number and we went up to my room. Eli surveyed it critically: "Could be worse, I guess." He proceeded to sprawl on the only bed, fully clothed. Waving his legs and matching toes to heels he shed his shoes, displaying threadbare socks.

He shoved a sausagey finger at the phone's rotary dial and pressed it down. It clanged into position. Eli's French was guttural and splintered. His conversation over, he gathered his discarded shoes and muttered: "Let us go."

That is how we came to face Pierre in this cafe. He compulsively passes a venous hand over his blushing baldness, to fend off the breeze.

"You and Shmuel were friends" - Eli implores. Pierre nods eagerly, stealthily peeking at me beneath his furled eyebrows. "This is no way to treat a friend" - Eli hectors him, bending forward, his face skirting his interlocutor's, a burly arm cast casually on creaking armrests.

"What is it that you want?" - Pierre stammers and strokes a lumpy throat. His body petrified, only his hands are squirming on the table, like rodents in a maze.

Eli eyes his discomfiture, amused.

"I want you to tell the truth and only the truth" - he reassures Pierre nonchalantly even as he mutilates a plastic straw and chucks it at Pierre's face. The latter's spectral pallor alternates with crimson.

"We don't want you testify to anything that is not the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Follow the wording of the

courtroom oath tomorrow morning" - Eli lunges at Pierre, a breathing distance from his startled face. I couldn't help admiring the bestial move, Eli's proficiency in this survival game, the managed tension between his bulk and supple muscles.

He recoils abruptly, the quintessence of indifferent equanimity.

"But Shmuel gave me the documents" - Pierre says, attempting to resist - "I got the documents from him! How else could I have obtained this highly classified material that's locked in safes?"

Eli nods understandingly. He moistens a corpulent finger and uses it to haul some cigarette residues to Pierre's overflowing ashtray.

"I wonder" - Eli, dreamily - "did he also tell you to sell these crucial data to the local paper with the biggest circulation - and for pennies?"

Pierre swallows hard. Then, ejecting all the air he hoarded since the beginning of our chat, he shakes his head: "No, this was my invention."

Eli glowers at him with feigned astonishment.

"Invention?" - he echoes - "Invention..."

Pierre pounds the soggy butt of his mutilated cigarette under heel.

"I will stick to the truth in court" - he obstinately reiterates. Eli's angelic smile.

"But I will tell them that Shmuel was the source of these cursed documents."

"Only the truth, I told you" - Eli eggs him on solemnly. "Don't stray either left or right. If Shmuel was enough of a fool to give the files to unauthorised personnel, that is his problem, not yours" - a pause. "In any case, I understand that he didn't touch a centime from the fee the magazine paid you."

Pierre looks intently at the river.

"No" - he admits - "Shmuel didn't even know I'm going to do it, my liaison with the paper" - reanimated - "I didn't share with him because he never was my partner!"

"Superb, superb!" - Eli enthuses - "It is such a pleasure to hold a fruitful conversation with someone as intelligent as you. By the way, what are you doing now that you've been fired? You got a job? Perhaps a hobby?"

Pierre's lips uncurl bitterly. He straightens his battered spectacles on shiny nose and passes an amnesiac hand on long-gone hair.



"Nothing" - he exclaims, examining Eli with hurtful slyness - "The boss dumped me like that, no severance fee, no nothing, simply because he caught me drinking on the job."

Eli snaps calloused fingers. He orders a glass of the finest whiskey for his guest. Pierre smiles gratefully.

"We do a lot of business in Europe, Shmuel and I" - Eli expounds - "We need faithful, quick-witted collaborators. I promise you, we don't throw people to the street after years of dedicated service without enough to buy a drink on such a lovely day."

Pierre moans as he consumes the amber potion. His eyes flit between Eli and myself. His cheekbones drip perspiring beads into his beverage. He doesn't wipe them. His nostrils flare. He gulps again.

"Settled then" - Eli concludes - "I am delighted to have met you. We now have friends in common. We will keep in touch. We shan't forget you" - but he stays put.

Shocked into action by this brusque farewell, Pierre dries his lips with greasy sleeve and begs:

"Just let me give you my details..."

Eli's entire face implodes into a thin-tipped leer. He taps Pierre's stooping shoulder and pronounces:

"We will find you, worry not. We always find our friends. Your address is (it was). Your phone, though currently unlisted, is (the number). You share apartment with (her name). Your only child lives with his mother in this address (true)."

We turn our backs on a confounded Pierre and down the steps that lead into the street. I watch him slumped, staring ahead, the glass half raised and tilted.

Eli commands: "Let's take a cab, I am bushed. But first, go back there and pay for all the drinks. Surely you don't expect me to pick up the tab as well?"

I leave him standing in the middle of the thoroughfare and return to Pierre, the catatonic. I place a note of a hundred francs in front of him but do not say a word. He waves his hand in feeble, interrupted, protest.

Eli catnaps on the back seat of a waiting cab.

"To the hotel" - I tell the driver. Eli wakes.

He growls:

"It is the last time I am here to save your ass, you hear me?"

Standing at the entrance of our plain hotel, he grabs my shoulders and turns me around ferociously to face him.

He stares at me the way he did at Pierre:

"This is the last time, you hear me? There will be no more"

I nod, he smiles, and we embrace.

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# Death of the Poet

by Sam Vaknin

Read the [Hebrew original](#).

The poet succumbed at eight o'clock AM.

Five minutes prior to his death, he made use of a stained rotary dial phone, its duct-taped parts precariously clinging to each other. His speech was slurred but his interlocutor - a fan - thought it nothing extraordinary.

Sighing ostentatiously, she reluctantly agreed to come to him, volubly replacing her receiver in its cradle.

She was not surprised to be met by others he had called, nor was she astounded to learn that he had died all by himself, wrapped in two dusty khaki blankets, sprawled on a tattered mattress, flung on an iron frame that served as both bed and escritoire. It was so like him, to die like that.

Removing the rigored cadaver through the narrow doorway was tricky. The medics rolled it down the claustrophobic and penumbral staircase (there was no lift). His ink-tainted right hand kept striking the peeling yarns of greenery that hung, flayed, from crumbling concrete walls.

Panting, they laid him on the bottom stair, an outsized embryo with jet black hair and eagled nose. His nostrils quivered.

The radio reported his passing and lengthy obituaries adorned tomorrow's press. The critics cloaked with affected objectivity the overpowering disdain they held the man, his lifestyle, and his work in. They claimed to have been his closest friends and recounted some futile anecdotes.

The ceremony held by the municipality in the Writers Hall was open to the public.

I said to Nomi:

"Why don't you approach the organisers? Tell them that you have composed music to some of his poems and that you are willing to perform them."

They were thrilled and Nomi settled on two songs - one that I liked and one that was her preference. She had a fortnight to rehearse them ceaselessly.

Then Dani phoned me. Years ago, still adolescent, he co-starred with the poet in a television show. They spent the night discoursing, which rendered them inseparable thereafter, the apprentice and his mentor. Because Dani is what he is - he turned into the poet's fan. And because he is what he is - he abruptly brought it to a halt. They never met again. Dani never thinks of himself in terms of extremism but his relationship with the dead poet was such.

And now he enquired:

"You heard? He is dead."

But he did not pause for a response. He went on to recount the by now familiar story of how they met, and how he admired the poet's ingenuity, inventiveness, aplomb, the love he made to the Hebrew language. And how it was all over.

"I am not attending this fallacious wake" - Dani is soft-spoken even when his words are not.

That evening, Nomi and I went to the Writers' Hall. A woman with anorectic eyes compared our invitation to a clammy list. We slumped into some wooden deck chairs, attired steamily in our discomfort. People climbed onto a squeaky stage and then retreated, having recited the poet's work in a post-mortem elocution. They argued with venomous scholarship some fine points.

The poet's raisiny and birdlike mother was all aflutter in the front row, flanked by the agitated organisers. She flung herself at the poet's ex spouse and at her son, protesting creakily and waving a hefty purse:

"Away with you!" - she screamed - "You killed my boy!"

The divorcee approached, her black dress rustling, hand soothingly extended, but midway changed her mind and climbed the podium.

She promised anodyne to preserve the poet's heritage by issuing a definitive edition of his writings, both published and in manuscript. Her voice was steady, her gestures assured, her son clung to her dress eyeing us and the scenery indifferently. He dismounted as he climbed, obediently and unaffectedly.

On cue, Nomi sang two bits, her voice a luscious blond. She looked so lonesome onstage, a battered playback cassette-recorder, a wireless microphone, her quaking palms. When the last

note died I discovered that I am not breathing and that I turned her notepad into pulp.

On her odyssey from stage to seat, Nomi glanced coyly at the poet's still roiled mother, who hastened to hug and compliment her warmly.

The night was over and the mob dispersed.

The poet's mother stood forlorn, tugging at the impatient sleeves of the departing as she demanded: "How shall I get back?" - but she wouldn't say whereto. Roundly ignored by the pulsating throngs of well-wishers, she watched them comparing impressions, exchanging phone numbers, mourning the poet and, through his agency, themselves.

"I knew your son" - I said.

I really did - perhaps not as intimately as a friend, but probably more than did most of those present. Once I visited that warehouse of weathered books he called his home, sat on his monkish bed, played the effaced keys of his battered typewriter.

I offered her a ride and she accepted, sighing with childish relief.

Nomi drove and I listened to the poet's mother. Like him she wept in words.

"He used to visit me every week" - with pride. Invited us for a drink in her room at the seniors' home. The evening chilled, she observed. How about a warm libation ("I have even hot chocolate"). When we declined politely, she tempted us with exclusive access to letters the poet wrote to her.

We took a rain check and made a heartening spectacle out of noting down her address and her phone number.

The night guard at the entrance, besieged by a polished wooden counter and facing banks of noiseless television screens, winked at us.

"Thank you for bringing her back. A wonderful woman but lousy kids. No one ever visits."

He turned to face the poet's mother, raising his voice unnecessarily:

"And how are you tonight?"

Ignoring him, she eyed us inquisitively:

"You have children? No? What are you waiting for?" - her shrivelled finger spiralling - "Make a few children and hurry about it. Believe me, nothing in life is more important. Nothing if not..."

The swooshing elevator doors, an amputated sentence, and she was gone.

At home, we lay on our backs, each in its corner of our bed, trying to pierce the darkness blindly.

We never mentioned that evening, neither have we returned to visit the poet's mother. We came close to doing so, though. One Saturday we mutely decided to climb the hill and drop by the seniors' home. Instead, we ventured further, to Jaffa, and bought Sambusak pastry, filled with boiled eggs and acrid cheese.

Side by side we lived, my Nomi and I.

And then she divorced me and so many things transpired that the poet and his mother and this story were all but forgotten.

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# Redemption

by Sam Vaknin

My grandfather sat on a divan, back stiff and eyes tight-shut, when the news arrived. At the age of seventy, his body still preserved the womaniser's tensile, proud, virility. He dyed his hair jet black. Original Moroccan music, wistful and lusty, the desert's guttural refrain, poured forth from a patinated gramophone. The yearning tarred his cheeks with bloodied brush, a capillary network that poured into his sockets.

Now, facing him distraught, my father was reciting gingerly the information about his little sister, confessing abject failure as the clan's firstborn. His elder sister died in youth but even had she lived she wouldn't have qualified to supervise the brood due to her gender. It was my father's role to oversee his younger siblings, especially the females, the thus preserve the honour of his kinfolk.

Being a melancholy and guarded man, he blamed them for conspiring against him. He envied them instead of loving. He kept strict ledgers of help received and given. He felt deprived, begrudging their successes. They drifted apart and my father turned into unwelcome recluse, visited only by my tyrannical grandfather. On such occasions, my father was again a battered, chided, frightened child.

That day, with manifest obsequiousness, he served the patriarch with tea and home-made pastry arranged on brightly illustrated tin trays. My grandpa muttered balefully, as was his wont, and sank his dentures into the steamy dough, not bothering to thank him.

As dusk gave way to night, my father fetched the grouser's embroidered slippers and gently placed his venous, chalky feet on a dilapidated stool. He wrapped them in a blanket. Thus shoed and well-ensconced, the old man fell asleep.

These loving gestures - my father's whole repertoire - were taken by my grandpa as his due, a pillar of the hierarchy that let him beat his toddler son and send him, in eerie pre-dawn hours, to shoulder bursting wineskins. This is the order of the world: one

generation serves another and elder brothers rule their womenfolk.

"Whore" - my grandpa sneered. His voice subdued, only his face conveyed his crimson wrath. My father nodded his assent and sat opposed, sighing in weariness and resignation.

"Whose is it, do we know?" - my grandpa probed at last. My father snuffed the ornamental music and shrugged uncertainly. My grandpa rubbed his reddened eyelids and then slumped.

"We need to find him and arrange a wedding" - he ruled. My father winced, propelled by the incisive diction into the grimy alleys of his childhood, the wine tide and ebbing in the pelt containers, the origin of his recurrent nightmares, nocturnal shrieks, sweaty relief when nestled in my mother's arms, his brow soaked, his heart in wild percussion.

"Today it's different, Abuya" - my father mumbled, using the Moroccan epithet. My grandpa whipped him with a withering glower.

"I will depart tomorrow" - my father whispered - "But I don't wish to talk to her."

"Don't do it" - consented grandpa, his eyes still shut, waving a steady hand in the general direction of the decimated music - "Just salvage our dignity and hers."

The next day, father packed his crumbling cardboard suitcase, the one he used when he fled Morocco, a disillusioned adolescent. He neatly folded in some underwear and faded-blue construction worker's sleeveless garments. On top he placed a rusting razor and other necessities.

I watched him from the porch, he waning, a child size figure, going to the Negev, the heartless desert, to restore through a defiled sister the family's blemished honour. He stood there, leaning on the shed, patiently awaiting the tardy transport. The bus digested him with eager exhalation.

He has been away for four days and three nights. The fine dust of distant places has settled in his stubble. He wiped his soles on the entrance rug, removed soiled clothes and gave them to my mother. He slipped into his tunic and his thongs, uttering in barely audible relief, then sank into an armchair.

My mother served up scolding tea in dainty cups. He sipped it absent-minded, dipping a sesame cracker in the minty liquid. Having reposed, he sighed and stretched his limbs. He never said a word about the trip.



A few months passed before his sister called. She phoned during the day, attempting to avoid my father, who was at work. My mother spoke to her, receiver in abraded hand like hot potato.

We were all invited to her forthcoming wedding. She was to marry a Northern, elder man of means. He will adopt the child, she added. Still enamoured with her elusive lover, she admitted, it wasn't the hideous affair we made it out to be. These days and nights (too short) of lust and passion in the wasteland have yielded her a daughter, a flesh memento of her paramour.

My mother listened stone-faced. "We cannot come" - she said, her voice aloof - "my husband won't allow it." But we all wish her happiness in newfound matrimony. In the very last second, as she was replacing the handset in its cradle, she whispered, maybe to herself: "Take care of you and of the little one."

She subsided on the stool, next to the phone, and scrutinised the blank wall opposite her. I busily pretended not to notice her tearful countenance.

When my father came back from his excruciating work on the scaffolds, my mother laid the table. They dined silently, as usual. When he finished, she cleared the dishes, placing them in lukewarm water. "Your little sister called" - she told him - "She is inviting us to her wedding up north. She is marrying a wealthy man rather older than herself, so all's well that ends well. At least she won't be destitute."

"None of my concern" - interjected my father gruffly, heavily rising from the chair.

The following day he travelled south, to meet my grandpa. He then proceeded to see his other brothers and his sisters. That over, he returned, called in sick and remained at home for weeks.

When his youngest sibling, my uncle, came to visit, my father embraced him warmly. He loved them all but only this Benjamin reciprocated. My father pampered him and listened attentively to his seafaring tales, echoes of distant places, among the glasses of scented Araq, a powerful absinthe. They munched on sour carrots dipped in oil.

At last, my father raised the subject. Retreating to our chambers, we left them there to thrash the matter out through the night. Their voices drifted, raised and then restrained. My father shrilly argued but his brother countered self-convinced. He packed and left in the early hours of the morning.

My father entered our room, defeated, and tucked us in unnecessarily. He turned off all the lights, a distended, dismal

shadow, and surveyed us, his beefy shoulder propped against the doorframe.

My mother instructed us severely:

"If daddy's youngest brother calls, don't answer. Nor he neither his wayward sister are part of our family. Your father excommunicated them forever and cursed their lineage. They have disgraced us. Now they are perfect strangers."

I liked my uncle - boyish and outgoing, hair long, and smooth, and often brushed and dried, his clothes the latest fashion from abroad. He was a seaman. His visits smelled of outlying cities and sinful women thin-clad in bustling ports. He carried stacks of foreign bills stashed in his socks and bought my mother foreign, costly fragrances (she buried them among her lingerie until they all evaporated).

At the bottom of his magic chest lay booklets with titillating tales of sizzling sex and awesome drug lords. I waited for his visits with the impatience of an inmate. He was the idol of my budding willfulness and nascent freedom. I resented our forced estrangement.

And so began my mutiny. Lured by the siren songs of far-flung lands, of sexual liberation, and of equality, I travelled to my grandma's home, an uninvited guest. My uncle, whose name now we could not pronounce, was there. We strolled the windswept promenade of Beer-Sheba, kicking some skeletal branches as we talked. He treated me as an adult.

Then it was time to return. My father, aware of my encounter, regarded it as treason, another broken link in the crumbling chain of his existence. To him, I was a co-conspirator. I shamed him publicly. He felt humiliated in his own abode. He didn't say a thing, but not long after, he signed me over to the army as a minor. My mother tremblingly co-signed and mutely pleaded with my father to recant.

But he would not. Immersed in hurt, he just imploded, blankly staring at the television screen. He took to leaping anxiously with every phone ring, instructing us in panic to respond. He didn't want to talk to anyone, he promised.

When I enlisted, he accompanied me to the draft board. Evading any contact, he occupied a tiny, torturous wooden stool. He didn't budge for hours and didn't say a word and didn't kiss farewell, departing with a mere "goodbye". I watched him from the bus' window as he receded, stooped, into a public park. He collapsed onto a bench and waved away the pigeons that badgered him for

breadcrumbs. Finally, he let one near and kicked her with his shoe. They scattered.

I didn't visit, not even on vacations. I found father-substitutes, adopted other families as home. At times, I would remember him, a tiny, lonely figure, on a garden bench, surrounded by the birds.

One day, my service in the army nearly over, my mother called and said: "Your father wants you here."

At once I felt like burdened with premonitory sadness, with the belated anguish of this certain moment. She told me that my uncle died in shipwreck.

"His cousin was with him to the end. He clung on to a plank all night, till dawn. He fought the waves and floated. And then they heard him mutter: what's the point and saw him letting go and sinking under. They say he drowned tranquil and composed."

I alighted from the belching bus before it reached my parents', traversing accustomed pathways, touching childhood trees, pausing in front of the boarded cinema house, a fading poster knocking about its peeling side. A titian cloud of falling leaves engulfed it all. The sea roared at a distance as if from memory.

I knocked, my father opened. We contemplated one another, vaguely familiar. Alarming corpulence and evil hoary streaks. Time etched its brown ravines in sagging flesh, the skin a flayed protection. He spread his arms and hugged me. I cautiously accepted and dryly kissed his stubble.

He ushered me inside and sat me by my brothers. I greeted them in silence. My father helped my mother serve refreshments, peeled almonds and solid confitures. We sulked in mounting discomfort.

Sighing, my father rose and climbed the spiral staircase to his room. He soon returned, clad in his best attire, his synagogue and festive uniform, the suit he wore in my Bar-Mitzvah.

Like birds after the storm the house was filled with curled rabbis. Flaunting their garb, grimly conferring with my father, they eyed the table critically.

"There's more!" - my mother hastened - "There's food, after you finish."

"Are these all your children?" - they demanded and my father, blushing, soon admitted that my sister wants no part in the impending ceremony. They nodded sympathetically. They linked their talliths (prayer shawls) into a huppah (wedding canopy) and ordered us to squat beneath it.

They blessed the house, its inhabitants and future monotonously. My father's face illuminated, his eyes aglow. He

handed each rabbi and each cantor a folded envelope from an overflowing pocket in his vest and poured them Araq to warm their hoarsely throats. They gulped the fiery libations, chanting their invocations as they swallowed.

With marked anticipation they assumed the better seats around the table and plunged into my mother's dishes. She waited on them deferentially. Burping aloud, the food devoured, they broke into a vigorous recital of pious hymns.

Night fell and my father entered the guest room and settled by my bed. He drew the covers to my chin and straightened wrinkled corners.

"We blessed the house" - he said - "to fend off a disaster."

I asked him what he was afraid of. He told me that he cursed his brother to die young and now that he did, my father was anxious.

"You loved him very much" - I said and he averted his face.

Waves clashed with undulating ripples to deafening effect.

"There will be a storm tonight" - my dad said finally.

"I guess so" - I agreed - "Good night. I am bushed, I need to rise and shine early, back to the army."

I turned around to face to the naked wall.

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# Shalev is Silent

by Sam Vaknin

Read the [Hebrew original](#).

Shalev's ample back is propped against the laundry dryer and he is keeping silent. It jerks, he jolts, eyes downcast, his short-sleeved T-shirt defenceless against the arctic ambiance.

"Shalev, say something" - I mutter. He only smiles. It is my daybreak plea, repeated each morning since he quietened.

By way of responding, he turns to face the glass eye of the coinless Laundromat, his stooping shoulders focused upon the swirling garments. He motions to me to lay my wash on a truncated soggy wooden slab.

The laundry room is high ceilinged. Rags decomposing hang flayed on oxblood iron juts, stabbing four walls coarsely mortared by the inmates. Pipes conjoined with mouldy tape drip onto the twin contraptions - the malignantly oversized washer and dryer.

Shalev is average height but way obese. His wild stubble and wire glasses accentuate his burliness, the towering machinery, the vaulted chamber. "The Cyclops's Cave", I call it and well-read Shalev just chuckles. He casts a longing glance at a pile of books and snacks awaiting in his "Promised Corner". But he wouldn't say a word.

I occupied one of the twin armchairs in the ironing parlour and set the backgammon board to play. Shalev was preceded in this job by a transvestite whose nocturnal off-key strains of yearning were still evoked. Forced to sequester him away from virile lust - both others' and his own - the prison authorities allowed him to import his shoddy furniture into the concrete monastery that later became the washroom.

Shalev slept in his predecessor's bed and kept his munchies in his metal bureau, coated with peeling sepia paper cuttings. Now, he sank into the matching armchair, arranging his limbs gingerly, as though preparing to inventory them. He smoothed his feral moustache with two stubby stained fingers and studied the board alertly.

He then rose from his seat, swung shut the door but didn't bolt it (regulations). To fend off the gloom, I stretched over and turned on the milky lights above his bookshelf. His wife got him some of the volumes and others he borrowed from the prison's library, my workplace.

Shalev inclined and smothered a round piece with a bulky fingertip. He drove it to a screeching halt next to a corner of the patterned board. Then, content, he fisted the yellowed dice and hurled them at the table. Six-six. His eyes aflame, he basked in this auspicious opening.

I waited with bated breath for an exclamation of his evident exuberance - but Shalev just proceeded to conjure his pieces into and out of existence in a whirlwind of clattering dice and scraping moves and sweaty palms. He suppressed even his customary snickers at my clumsiness. Perhaps chortling was too akin to speech.

"Shalev" - I said - "why have you stopped talking? Why don't you laugh anymore? Why the silence?"

He flings a pair of agitated dice at me. I groan as I pick them off the goeey floor.

"Listen" - I persisted - "I have an idea." An involuntary twitch betrayed his interest.

"Why don't you write what you have to say? We will prepare a stack of small cards here and you could jot on them to your heart's content."

"What cannot be said in words, can sometimes be expressed in letters."

Shalev froze and for a minute there I thought I lost him. Then he nodded his head excitedly. I abandoned him and his victory over me and bolted outside, into the greying drizzle. I crossed two lanes muddied by steamy kitchen waste and absconded with a pack of printing paper from the library. Hiding them under my tattered blemished coat, I hastened to the laundry room.

Shalev arranged the pieces in two equidimensional towers of alternating black and white. I proudly presented my paper loot. We used a ruler and scissors to divide them into squares. And all that protracted time I prayed that Shalev will not devolve from verbal to written taciturnity.

Shalev held the ordinary pen I gave him as though he never handled a writing implement before. He scrawled his tortured letters excruciatingly:

"I want to ask you for a big favour."

The dryer banged spasmodically and ceased.

"I want you to explain to my wife why I am keeping silent."

The hush was broken only by the sounds of his laboured scribbling.

"I have a feeling that no one loves me anymore. She is distancing herself and I am losing my daughters. When on vacation, I am a stranger in my own home, with no authority or recognition. It feels so helpless. I cannot hold on to them. Tonight I dreamt that I am screaming as they retreated, eerily oblivious to my pleading, to my words. So I decided to keep quiet. Tell her all that for me, will you?"

I nodded and he lifted himself from the crumbling armchair, hugging my soiled clothes, and trotting towards the rumbling, cornered appliance.

The following morning, at six o'clock, the warden bawled our names, marking those present. Ensnared in dreary blazers, we fended off the chill. Shalev, wearing his semipternal T-shirt, leaned on the barrack wall. "Stand straight" - the warden barked and cast an evil glance. Shalev recoiled dreamily. "Who's missing?" - our sentinel demanded and, not waiting for an answer, invaded our windswept accommodation.

"You, come with me" - he motioned to Shalev - "The staff complained yesterday. Clothes were amiss. What happened?"

Shalev kept mum.

"He doesn't talk" - somebody volunteered - "He is on a strike." And wicked sniggering.

"What is it that I am told?" - the warden shrilled - "You are not talking? With this scum" - his outstretched hand enclosed us all, a brown effluence - "you can do whatever you want. But with the authorities of this facility, you hear, you will respond! Clear?"

Shalev just nodded absentmindedly. This far from innocuous acquiescence infuriated our guardian.

"It is not the last you hear of me" - he spat and trotted towards the management's stone parapet, splashing jets of mud on our rubber boots. Shalev grabbed my arm and navigated me towards the prisoners' public phone. Today was his turn to make use of it, his ten minutes with the outside world.

A big, uniformed, crowd surrounded the booth. Everyone knew by now about Shalev's weird protest. They came here to loot his minutes, to scavenge the carrion of his allotted phone call. When they saw me, they hummed in disappointment and dispersed, only to perch on the nearby benches, just in case.

Torrential rain volleyed the butt-scorched and graffiti-tattooed plastic shell with itinerant orange leaves. I held on to the scarred receiver and dialled Shalev's home, his family.

His wife picked up. I recalled her deceptive fragility and her two well-attired, well-mannered offspring. She always carried baskets with her - one with food and one full of reading material. They did not bother to inspect their contents at the gate anymore, that's how predictable she was.

"Hello, this is Shmuel" - I said and read the note to her.

Silence ensued, chased by defiant sobbing:

"This is not true. We do love him" - whimpers.

"Shalev" - I hesitated, distressed, under the shadows cast by his hirsute skull - "Shalev, please, she is crying..."

To the receiver:

"I am giving you Shalev."

Shalev held the handset in his plump hand and listened attentively.

"Are you there?"

He kept mute for many minutes, digging a moat of silence against the verbal onslaught of his wife. He listened to his daughters, head tilted, eyes moist, lips clenched.

Then, gently, he replaced the mouthpiece in its cradle, stifling his children's whining.

There he stood, bent, broken, brow kissing the frosty metal, reluctantly driven away by the minacious grumblings of his fellow inmates. He mournfully dragged his feet along the silt-spattered road to our barracks. Sometimes he stopped and kicked a gravel listlessly, watching its trajectory transfixed, until it hit the rustling bush and vanished.

"Hey, you!" - it was the warden, materialising with the greyness of an impeccable camouflage.

"The chief wants to talk to you about your silence."

Shalev's eyes shifted in the manner of a hunted game. A muscle pulsed wildly in his cheek.

"He doesn't speak" - I ventured, head bowed, eyes locked on the grimy shoes of our custodian - "I can accompany him. He corresponds with me and..."

"You do what you are told to do" - the words awhipping, eyes socketed in bloodshot red - "or you will end up just like him, in the solitary!"

Bad winds thrashed Shalev's flimsy summer shirt as he descended towards the patched glass door at the entrance to the headquarters.



Back in the barracks, I sat cross-legged on Shalev's bed, eyeing his neatly folded blankets, clean smelling, flower-patterned sheets, the mound of books under his night lamp.

I got up, tucked my shirttails into my cord-held trousers and crossed the square between the barracks and the management. Shalev was seated, overflowing, on a tiny stone bench, studying his fingers as he crossed and then uncrossed them. He rubbed the sole of one of his boots against the other. His lips, tightened pale, contrasted morbidly with the inkiness of his beard and whiskers.

"Go away" - ordered the warden offhandedly.

"Shalev" - I said but he did not react - "I have an offer to make. Give me your silence. I want to buy it from you. Let me be the one to go to the chief and then refuse to talk to him. You tell him that everything is fine, that it was all one big misunderstanding, that you had a fight with your wife, with your family. Apologise profusely. After we exit, I will give you back your silence, I swear to you."

Shalev exerted himself and raised his head, watching me intently. But then his chin drooped and I chastised myself: "you lost him, you lost him" and I wanted to beat myself unconscious.

The warden shook his head in mute disdain.

The silence was broken by the smoke-drenched curses of prisoners and staff, as they crossed the link chained paths. A woman staffer exited, banging a wooden frame behind her portly figure. She scrutinised the warden questioningly, a sooty cigarette hanging from the corner of a lipstick smear:

"This is Shalev?"

"That's me" - said Shalev - "I am ready now. I will talk to you."

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# Pet Snail

by Sam Vaknin

Read the [Hebrew original](#).

Nomi and I had a snail. We placed it in any empty ice-cream packing, on a bed of lettuce. We took turns spraying it with water drops. Morning come, Nomi would emerge from our bed, her face dishevelled, and sleepwalk to enquire how the snail was doing. She rejoiced with every black-rimmed bite, clapping her hands and drawing me to witness the tiny miracle. She replaced the perforated leaf with a green and dewy one about once a week.

At first, her minuscule charge concealed itself among the decaying greenery. Nomi spent hours, patiently awaiting a revelation. Crowned with a set of dark, huge earphones that I bought her, she pounded her keyboard, keeping a lovat eye on the snail's abode.

When it finally emerged one day, the music stopped and she exclaimed elatedly.

Later that year, I was sentenced to a prison term. On the way home, courtroom echoes reverberated in the hushed interior of the car. Nomi said: "Let's go somewhere before..." And I responded: "Let us go to Eilat, to our hotel."

"A pity the jazz festival is over" - she frowned. "A pity" - I agreed.

At home, an air of doom, we packed a hasty suitcase and booked the flight.

A thing I said reminded Nomi of the snail. She held its lair in both her hands and placed it accusingly on the glass top table in the living room.

"What shall we do with it?"

"Let's leave it enough water and food for a whole week" - I suggested - "His needs are few, he is so teeny, so I don't think there'll be a problem."

Nomi secured an errant golden curl behind her ear: "You sure?" I was and so we entombed him beneath some salad leaves and

showered him with water and Nomi giggled: "To him it's rain." Then she grew serious.

It was an early morning. Nomi felt my swollen eyelids, pausing her finger on the protruding veins. On the way to the elevator, she stopped, unloaded a laden rucksack and hurried to the entrance door, wildly rummaging for the keys in her multicoloured purse. She returned to me, flushing and panting and uttered: "It is fine!" "It climbed through some lettuce sprouts" - she reported. Her morning voice was moist and hoarse, Edith Piaf-like. I cast a virile hand over her shoulder and guided her outside.

We spent four days in Eilat. We slept a lot and swam the pools, among the waterfalls and artificial rocks. My sister happened to be staying there with her newly-minted family. But it was already chilly and autumnal and, four nights later, we decided to return. My imminent incarceration loomed and Nomi was atypically broody. I tried to comfort her, thinking what a consummate liar I have become.

When we reached home, Nomi dumped her suitcase, precariously balanced on its two hind wheels. I heard the metallic clinking of unfurled bolts and she was gone. A minute or two later: "I can't find it!" and then "It is not here, Sam!"

We cautiously separated one gnawed leaf from another. We studied the inside of the box and its immediate neighbourhood, the marble counter. The snail was nowhere to be found.

Nomi was restless for the remainder of that day. Down hill, at a crossroad, concealed behind a gas station, stood an intimate French restaurant. It was our crisis eatery, a refuge of self-administered great wines and nouvelle cuisine. But today its charms failed. Nomi was crestfallen throughout dinner. She sat and gestured and chewed the food mechanically.

Still, ever so practical, faced with numerous arrangements before my disappearance, she recovered. But she refused to discard the now orphaned container and she made sure the leaves were always fresh and glistening. She thought that I didn't notice how she inspected the box, hoping to find her snail in it, revenant.

"It must be bigger now" - she sighed and then - "Today I plan to clean the entire house. It is your last weekend here."

On cue, I went to the public library and spent a good few hours reading Kafka's "Metamorphosis", a story about a respectable clerk turned loathsome insect in his sleep.

We used to clean the house together, Nomi and I. She would sluice the floor and I would dust, scrub the bathrooms and the

kitchen. It was one of the last things we did together before we stopped.

The afternoon was muggy and I walked home, immersed in thought. I found Nomi slouched on an armchair, surrounded by heaps of furniture and bundled carpets. Her face wore tearful makeup, her eyes were distant, and her hair bedraggled. I upturned a chair and faced her, silently.

She pointed speechlessly at the general direction of the kitchen and then subsided.

"I stepped on it, I squashed it" - and added frantically - "I didn't mean to! It is still so small and I don't know how it made it to that corner!"

"It must have climbed the refrigerator and descended to the floor" - I ventured. She signalled me to keep away.

"I had to clean the house because of you, because you are going" - in an accusatory tone.

I didn't know how to respond, so I tiptoed to the kitchen and contemplated the mess of snail and concha on the floor.

"Shall I wipe it off?" - I enquired meekly.

"Now, I don't even have a snail" - tears blended with startling exhalations - "You will be gone, too! I thought we could fight the world, you and I, that we are invincible. But it is not like that at all! We can't even look after one snail together!"

"Are you mad at me?" - I asked and she snorted, part pain and part contempt. She scooped the shattered snail with a paper towel and dumped both in the overflowing trash bin. She froze like that awhile and then, as if reaching a decision, she deposited the box, replete with lettuce leaves, in the garbage can.

"I don't think I am going to need it. I am never going to have another snail" - she paused - "At least not with you."

## **Ned's Short Life**

Lidija returned home all dusty and breathless, as was her habit ever since we have bought the apartment and she embarked on its thorough renovation, long months ago. Between two delicate but strong fingers she held aloft a transparent plastic bag, the kind she used to wrap around half-consumed comestibles in the refrigerator. Instinctively, I extended an inquisitive hand, but she recoiled and said: "Don't! There's a fish in there!" and this is how I saw Ned for the first time.

“He is a male,” - Lidija told me - “and Fred is a female”. In the crowded and smelly pet shop the salesgirl elaborated on the anatomic differences between the sexes. So, now Fred had a mate.

“Fred” is Fredericka, our first attempt at a goldfish. One of the handymen gave her to Lidija “to keep your husband company while you are away”, he explained mischievously. Fred grew up in a bowl and then graduated into a small and rather plain aquarium. I placed a clay elephant and a plastic, one-legged ballerina in it, but this unlikely couple did little to liven it up. Fred’s abode stood on the kitchen counter, next to a pile of yellow bananas, flame-orange mandarins, and assorted shrink-wrapped snacks. She swam melancholily to and fro, forlorn and lonely, toying with her own reflection.

A fortnight later, Lidija and I purchased a bigger tank. I filled it with tap water and dumped Fred in it. Shocked and distressed, she hid under a shell and refused to emerge, no matter the temptation. Hence Ned.

I knew next to nothing about new fish tanks, the need to “cycle” them owing to the absence of nitrogen-devouring bacteria, and the stress that all these cause the unfortunate inhabitants of my aquarium. I dumped Ned in the crystal-clear waters as unceremoniously as I did his would-be mate. But Ned - having graduated far worse aquaria in dingy pet shops - swam a few triumphant laps around the receptacle and then settled down to the business of chasing food scraps. Fred eyed him shyly and then joined him hesitantly. It was the first time she had moved in days.

As the time passed, Fred, a codependent goldfish if I ever saw one, excitedly clung to Ned’s bright orange tail and followed him wherever he glided. But Ned did not reciprocate. Far more aggressive than Fred, he deprived her of food, pursuing her in circles and leveraging his longer body and broader amidship to tackle the silvery female. All my exhortations and threats went on deaf ears: Ned would coyly slink away only to resume his belligerence when he figured I am out of range.

Still, every few hours, Fred and Ned would align themselves, as arrow-straight as soldiers on parade, and swing to and fro in unison in the currents, perfectly at peace, their delicate fins flapping regally and slowly. It was a bewitching, hypnotizing manifestation of some primordial order. I used to sit on the

armrest of a couch, enthralled by their antics, monitoring who does what to whom with the avidity of a natural scientist and the wonderment of a child. Gradually, the susurrations of the air pump; the gentle breeze of bubbles; and the elegant motility of my fancies all conspired to calm my rampant anxiety. I made a living off the proceeds of books I have written about my mental health disorder and so was gratified to escape the stifling and morbid environment of my own making.

Then, one morning, I woke up to find the couple gasping at the shell-covered bottom of their tank, tail and fins streaking red and rotting away, bit by tiny and ephemeral piece. The magic gone, it was replaced with the nightmarish horror that permeated the rest of my existence. I felt guilty, somehow threatened, imbued with the profound sadness that other people - normal people - associate with grieving. Reflexively, I surfed the Internet frenetically for answers; I downloaded a dozen books and read them; and I got up at all hours of the night to change the water in my Ned and Fred's minacious cesspool. I woke up with dread and bedded with foreboding and so did my version of Fred, my Lidija.

Ned's body was decaying fast. Fred continuously nudged him: "Are you alive? You come to play?" But, when she saw how serious his condition is, her whole demeanour changed. His swim bladder affected, his dwindling scales plastered with burrowing parasites, besieged by toxic levels of ammonia, Ned's compromised immune system - ravaged by his cramped and foul apprenticeship in the pet shop - didn't stand a chance. He wobbled pitifully. Fred stood next to him, still as a rock, allowing his sore body to rest against hers, giving him respite and the solace of her company. Then, exhausted by her own condition and overpowered by his much larger weight, she would swim away, glancing back sorrowfully as Ned sank and darted, staggered and careened.

Yet, Ned wouldn't give up. His magnificent tail consumed, he still took after the flakes of food that drifted down the water column; he still toured his new home, leftover fins flailing, bullet-like body strained, eyes bulging; he still teased Fred when he could and Fred was much alive when he revived. They slept together, occupying an alcove that afforded them protection from the filter-generated waves.

As the days passed and I added salt to the aquarium, Ned seemed to have recovered. Even his tail began to show some signs of black-tipped resurrection. He regained his appetite and his

territorial aggression and Fred seemed delighted to be again abused by a reanimated Ned. I was the proudest of fish-owners. And Lidija's crystalline laughter reverberated whenever Ned's truncated trunk ballistically caroused the waters.

But this was not to last: the salt had to go. The fresher the water became, the sicker Ned grew, infested with all manner of grey; shrunken; lethargic; and immobile except when fed. This time, he ignored even Fred's ichtyological pleas. Finally, she gave up on him and drifted away sullenly.

One morning, I lowered a tiny net into the water. Ned stirred and stared at the contraption and then, with an effort that probably required every last ounce of his strength, he bubbled up, rolling over and over, like a demented cork, all the while eyeing me, as though imploring: "You see? I am still alive! Please don't give up on me! Please give me another chance!" But I couldn't do that. I kept telling myself that I was protecting Fred's health and well-being, but really I was eliminating the constant source of anxiety and heartbreak that Ned has become.

I captured him and he lay in the net quiescent, tranquil. When his mutilated body hit the toilet, it made a muffled sound and, to me it sounded like "goodbye" or maybe "why". I flushed the water and Ned was gone.

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# Write Me a Letter

by Sam Vaknin

He looks at me with his single surviving eye and pleads: "Write me a letter."

I smile and remove the women's magazine from his hands. Under "Singles Ads" it says:

"165/33, feminine, rebellious, striking, looking for a man for serious relationship, Postal Box Office."

"Write me a letter" - he repeats and his lonely eye gleams.

"Soon, I am going to get my second, more beautiful one" - he adds apologetically.

We are in a residential caravan in a prison camp, whiling the time away. I am waiting for my inevitable, unnerving, early release and he is looking forward to that feminine, rebellious who will discern in his solitary eye that which he craves to witness in both hers.

I acquiesce and write to her, the mysterious stranger. My writing is calligraphic and Maurice convinces me that it, alone, should make the prospect meet him.

And when she does, it will all be different. He will demonstrate to her that there's a soul concealed in his awkward flesh and how his lonesome eye grasps colours and sun and light and shadows. Lots of shadows.

At night, he wakes, perspiring, stifling whimpering, panicky sounds, like beavers struggling to emerge, consuming his insides, driving the torture wheel called Maurice. He rises from his nightmare and shuffles to the slimy toilettes on the remainder of his leg. When he is back, face rinsed, he looks around, alarmed, climbs laboriously into the upper bunk, and tries to sleep.

But the sirens of that particular patrol car haunt him with red-blue flashes in the desiccated socket of his long-gone eye. He can't erase the gunfire sounds, the streaking bullets that carved his flesh with long, brown scars. The raining glass that gouged his eye erupts anew.



"I lost my eye in the showers" - he nags the dwindling numbers of his unwilling interlocutors. They heard it all before - the tale of Maurice and his magnificent porcelain ball that cost him 5000 New Israeli shekels.

"I was scared, so I pretended to be violent, so they became afraid of me. Everyone knew that I am not to be messed with!"

Maurice recounts to me his prime: replete with eye, a serviceable leg, and human form.

Now he frequents only hookers. He calls them "escort girls". They have been escorting him a long time now and he is a heaving cyclopaedia of their addresses, official prices, negotiating tactics, and final offers. "Half an hour" - he lectures me - "and you can come but once. So you better masturbate before. But you can still strike a bargain with them even if it happens."

He finds them pretty. As far as he is concerned, they are all attractive and stunning and he keeps wondering aloud why they ended up in bed with him. He relishes his good fortune and frequents their cubicles and sweaty cots. "In Haifa, some of them do it for 50 shekels!" - he gasps incredulously.

Maurice does not neglect his physical exercises.

"Am I triangular?" - he demands to know, swerving on his healthy limb, a dented nakedness, we are in the showers, avoiding effluence.

I study him closely. He has a well-developed torso, like a miniature Schwarzenegger. He is trilateral both front and back. His shoulders a triangle, imposed on squarish chest and powerful hands. I tell him so. But Maurice seeks second and third opinions. He circles the muddy pathways of the camp for hours, only a towel to his loins, and pesters every passerby. They all confirm my observations.

"Your stomach is repulsive" - he tells me earnestly - "Stop eating so much. Work out!"

I give him the letter I composed and he ponders it gravely. Then he folds it carefully and withdraws an envelope from his peeling iron dresser.

"Write me the address, too" - he says - "It must be the same hand."

I do so obediently. He inserts the letter in the envelope and licks it. Thus opaque and sealed, he places it gingerly in a drawer.

It joins four identical epistles.

"Maurice, when will you send these letters?" - I demand.

"Soon" - he laughs - "I don't have stamps. Every time I go on detail I forget to buy them. Tomorrow I will remember. Tomorrow

I will dispatch them and you will write me more. One of them will surely answer. Something will come out of it."

I suggest to him to address some his missives to the beauties on the TV soaps. He sign up to my charade enthusiastically and insists: "Write, write me a letter to them" - he doubles up in laughter.

Maurice carries in a mouldy plastic bag a few fading and creased photographs of himself before. He is surrounded with minimally-attired knockout adolescent girls. These may be the "escorts". He confesses to wedding three of them and to fathering a brood.

I notice a sad-eyed kid, sprawled on a sofa, gaping at the camera. It's unmistakable: a tiny Maurice. You also can't misjudge the expression in Maurice's single, dewy, eyeball.

But Maurice the Cyclops never cries. His vising headaches merely reduce him to reclining on his rusty metal bed, turning his back to us, pretending to be slumbering. His shoulders quaver, yet we never dare approach him.

"All my women betrayed me" - he tells me every morning, awakened by the screaming wardens. I wonder what he dreams of that makes him reiterate so often.

"The minute I entered the pen, they strayed with another. That's why I divorced them, all three" - he elaborates.

Maurice places little trust in women. They hurt him so. "But they are so beautiful!" - he utters wistfully, as he measures a new pair of jeans he bought in his last vacation. They are too loose. I tell him. He spends the remainder of the evening refitting them and adding holes and buckles to his belts.

"How is it now?" - he anxiously enquires of no one in particular.

"Much better, Maurice" - I reassure him.

At night, when no one sees, he changes the soggy patch covering his missing eye. It's nothing but a gauze and two adhesive bandages, plastered directly over the shrivelled, murky hole that's left of the glistening, jocular eye in Maurice's photos.

He is ashamed and doesn't want to nauseate us. Maurice has a developed aesthetic sense. He still remembers beauty and wants it in his life. But all he has right now is a dehydrated wrinkle above a hollow abyss in his skull. It's where he used to gaze at beauty from. But now it's dark. Only the muscles that surround it still react to absence. He mocks himself self-deprecatingly. There's nothing else to do without an eye, a leg, one's looks.

Maurice is suing the police. In his mind he has won and is already divvying up the reparations. He is going to buy a flat, a car, and then a girl. She is bound to adore him and they will live in

happiness and wealth and many children and Maurice will grow with them. "This is my second childhood" - he hums along with a hit song on the radio. In such times, Maurice is no longer in jail but in the hereafter, in a world of warm and loving families.

"I spent fourteen years inside" - he confides - "My father says I am lucky to have been shot. Maybe this way I will settle down. Maybe I will have enough money not to work and only raise my children."

The offspring he has already had are held back by his women. The same females who do not visit him and force him to stagger on the steep hills of Haifa just to see his kids for an instant and give them gifts. Maurice saves all his meager pay and uses it to buy his children presents and himself more clothes.

"Some girls make advances in the cab on the way back to jail" - he brags. "I tell them that I am doing time for burglaries and this turns them on. When I returned from my last vacation I met one girl, she fell for me, she asked me to sit next to her, she twisted her face like this" - Maurice demonstrates a yielding, kiss-ready, feminine mouth.

He can't believe his luck: "She is so beautiful" - he moans longingly. He thinks this can't be true, something must be wrong with the girl, that this may be a trap. She must be married - he freaks. "We are so miserable" - he sighs - "The minute we cross the gate, they go looking for someone else."

Maurice yearns for the olden days, ten years ago, when a woman was a woman and he was a proper man with eyes to look dames over and legs to chase them. Maurice isn't good at expressing pain. He prefers to measure shirts or to ask me to write him letters.

That evening, when I come back from the detail, I find Maurice parked on his bunk, his ailing leg impossibly extended, weighed down by a bulky orthopaedic shoe. He avoids me, dejected. And then:

"Vaknin" - he calls - "Come here, Vaknin."

I go and sit by him. At his request, I tie his laces: one cross, one over, and a butterfly. He shuts his eyes while people fuss around him. And now, the humiliation and the embarrassment - both mine and his. The intimate togetherness, a man, shoelaces, man, at dusk, a drafty room, in prison. The closest two can get - sometimes more than carnal. A kind of love.

"Vaknin, thank you" - he says, inspecting my endeavours critically - "Vaknin, what shall I do if someone answers my letters? What will happen then? I am afraid to post them, not to get a

response. I only have a socket. My beautiful eye hasn't arrived yet. I am crippled, crippled..."

Maurice breaks into a sob and I move closer and hug him and nestle him and wait for him to calm down.

But he does not. He is devoured by weeping. He crumbles in my arms, the tears engulfing both his eyes, ungluing the adhesive bandages and loosening the gauze. It falls. His triangular rib cage trembles, his inert leg twitches, and his absent eye, and all his offspring that are strewn across the city weep through him and the long years and his father, who is happy he was shot and the wall, the only witness to the anguished nights of Maurice.

And I weep with him. I, too, weep with him. Together.

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# Harmony

by Sam Vaknin

On the phone, hushed voices, in our bedroom, late afternoon, Noa declines an offer to meet with her lover. I stand in the corridor, book in hand, listening intently, refusing to believe.

Her side of the conversation consists of a half-hearted demurral balanced by a lot of hopeful incredulity. How do you know the key will be under the rug - she questions her interlocutor - and how can you be sure they won't be at home?

This is how this phone conversation proceeds and Noa can see a penumbral Sam projected by the hallway lighting and then she can see me entering the room and looking at her, dumbfounded. She casts a glance my way and ignores me, continues the exchange as though nothing entered her field of vision.

I tell her: "Disconnect, Noa, now!". She goes on talking and my voice turns harsher and echoes through this vacuous room. I approach and extend an infuriated hand towards the phone's cradle. Now Noa apologizes hastily and hangs up.

Ricocheting verbal shrapnel, sentences unuttered, tension. We look away, she at the phone, I at my tiptoed feet. Noa suddenly grins but it is sheer embarrassment. We can't believe that this is happening to us, to our togetherness.

Her smirk ignites my rage, as was to be expected. Perhaps that's what she wants. Maybe this is her way of making certain she got punished, of guaranteeing attention long denied her, even if only to be chastised as evil and corrupt. Anything but this months-long absence, I and my book, sprawled on the leather couch, turning a barbered nape and taciturn back to her.

So, here it comes: attention, rage, envy. She is almost content. It is evident in the way she lowers her lashes, slumped on our marital twin bed, no intention to sit up, as though inviting me to her, making love to him and me simultaneously: today with me here and tomorrow with him on the phone, or vice versa.

I am curiously unfazed now. I am cold-blooded and matter-of-fact. I weigh and analyze. I survey all the options as they invitingly

spread their dilemma horns. I inspect them with the indifference of a veteran client in an overpriced brothel. I am acquainted with the merchandise, no novelty here, it's all the same old nudity. The perforated lampshade swings pendularly, set in motion by a now forgotten hand gesture. It rations light, once to myself and once to her, our faces yellow-flickered strainers.

Noa rises and I tell her to follow me into the living room. She obeys speechlessly. When she passes me in the narrow corridor, I don't give way and I rub against her agitated softness. I can smell her hair, the sex that wafts into my nostrils like a dare.

We sit in our living room. It is a chilly quadrangle, strewn with blinking appliances, bisected by a massive glass table-top that rests on four perfected marble tits. The glass slab mirrors us, distorted, our reflections melt into each other. I cross-examine her. I want the details.

Full frontal nakedness? Did he penetrate her? Did she give head? His hands on both her breasts? How did he taste?

She is patient, not mutinous. She says she hoped I will find out. She thought she could have both, the lover and myself. Yes. Permanently, as a way of life, but it didn't work out. And all this time I am panicking: God, this is real, this is Noa and this is me and an evening and we are at our home and this has happened so unpredictable and no way out. Like a pre-mortem trepidation.

Now what shall we do? asks Noa and the question hangs midair. We peruse every aspect of this query. It is crystalline and glitters, you can't mistake its polish. It is untouchable, unreachable. Like a heavy stone on a distant star from which there's no return.

I listen to my voice. It's icy and I am stunned. It's decisive. My self-control impresses me.

I say: Let's separate for a year and then we'll see. Rent a small apartment, do as you please and in twelve months let's see if you still want me and if I still want you, if we are still emotionally available.

Noa wails vociferously. She makes no attempt to hide the tears. She sits up, a veritable Alice in horrorland: golden curls adorn her round shoulders, her face disproportionately large, she has the hands and feet of children, that's the way I see her. That's the way I always want to see her.

Her lamentation startles me. I realize that she is crying for me too, perhaps mostly on my behalf. I cannot join her.

I soothe: Look, no single side is guilty. I have neglected you and our relationship, I let them fester and this is the result. This situation is of both our making.

She is relieved. She glances at me with gratitude. I ask her if she would like some red wine and she affirms enthusiastically as though we just found the solution and there it is, chilling in our refrigerator and we didn't appreciate it. So, I walk slowly, extract the bottle that I placed there in another universe, uncork it and pour into potbellied glasses. The lacy foam subsides into the inky liquid. I bring this hue to Noa to consume. I click my tongue delighted at the taste.

Noa discusses details. What kind of apartment, where, how will she pay for it. She gets carried away, describing the interior decoration. I sip the wine strictly and not a word but I cannot look away from her exuberant eyes, intermittently flaring and decaying. She grows silent and swirls the fluid gently in her glass. She gazes into it as though trying to decipher the gory sediments left by the frothy drink. And then she sobs again.

She tells me that she loves me. She doesn't know what to do. She can't believe that she found herself in these circumstances. She no longer recognizes herself. What to do, she repeats her mantra, but this time I am not playing along, I am not her father after all. I feel as aghast and awkward as she does.

I stand up and stretch my bones. This is the kind of silence that breeds decisions. Not tense, just a break for data processing, like the dead moments when a floppy whirrs and the hard disk answers.

Noa changes her posture. I contemplate her body and wonder what it knew and not with me. A foot flashes, she bends and a swathe of milky breast, a nipple, his hand between her thighs.

I feel nothing, not even pain or fury. But I sense the distant echoes of a remote battle, behind the fortified hilltops of my self. It will arrive, this ruinous war, it will exact the price. Like everything else in life, it is only a matter of time.

I repeat to Noa her choice. She can remain here and we will try together, she can depart and we will separate, one year alone, maybe it's better that way. Maybe I am her undoing. And I keep reiterating silently: Noa, please ignore these monstrous alternatives offered by an alien, a stranger, not me. I love you. I love Noa. Throughout I want to hug her and make my love in her, but I just sit there, stony-faced, a scientist sifting through the formulas for a particularly complex experiment.

Now Noa is quiet, still rocked from time to time by mournful tremors, her fingers flutter and combine, a leg swings across the wide-brimmed, tattered arm of our sofa. She regards me tenderly.

I pour more wine. The halogen lights are blinding. We are so close, Noa and I, up there in the large screen of our TV. But really we are divided by glass and marble.

Noa takes her wine and toys with it. Suddenly she lays it down and bursts into bitter, convulsive whimpers, face buried in both hands, shoulders unruly.

"I can't leave you" - she sucks the words out of the thinning air - "I love you so. You are a wizard and I am hypnotized. I am staying here with you. Oh, let's try again!"

I let the words sink in. A rainbow ricochets from the glasses to the table. The light is piercing and in it I witness Noa making love. Like an unwanted child, this deed is with us, like an accident. Only it left me quadriplegic, breathless for all eternity, long after Noa is gone, and she will be gone. I now know that this, too, is only a matter of time.

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# Blind Date

by Sam Vaknin

They said to me: "Meeting girls requires effort. If you just sit at home and don't try to mingle, they won't come to you, you know! You got to get out more."

So, I got out more and made an effort.

I work as a consultant to small enterprises and desperate entrepreneurs, a lonely kind of living, not the type of job teeming with feminine prospects. I wake up every morning, advise my clients, return in the afternoon to a flickering microwave oven. Some television and a tachycardiac awakening in alien surroundings, my tenebrous living room and the chill. Then, soiled underwear, I sink into my unkempt bed and doze off, drooling thick saliva diagrams over sheets and crumpled pillow, like the two-dimensional rendition of a layered archeological excavation. Come morning, I sniff my art and recoil, only to be captivated again by its monotonous aesthetics.

Again the morning race abreast the crowded bus. I contort myself to glance through the driver's expansive windshield: Am I there yet? Did I arrive? I have customers everywhere, an ostensibly desirable state of affairs. I climb stairs and wonder: Maybe this time? They are bound to have a secretary, aren't they? Perhaps even a woman business partner, or an accountant!

They said to me: "There are all kinds of classes, why don't you register, it would be worth your while, these are the best places to pick up girls." But I do not. I just sit at home, anticipating. It is inconceivable that this deafening silence goes unheard, that my distress is not discernible, trapped though it may be between these walls.

And, still, this solitude.

Noon time, I boil some tea and lubricate a frying-pan with margarine, carefully held amidst its greasy wrappings. I empty the contents of three shattered eggs onto the seething outcome. A woman could have done all that, I know. What is a woman?

A naked foot, a thigh, waving its way into an ankle.

Her breasts, of course. I hallucinate them with a residual and diminishing ferocity. I give up and masturbate.

Evening time, I visit with my friends some neutral places, where we do not compete for female preference, nor are we graded for our attractiveness (or lack of it). Still, I resent their ability to dictate my choice of venues. Such indignation can easily fester into hatred and thence mutate into a sick haughtiness that says: They are powerless over me, I am resistant to their charms, truly, I do not need them at all.

One night I went on a blind date. I invested 49 shekels in a 9 words classified ad in a widely circulated rag. I wrote: "Blind man looking for blind woman for blind date" and my PO Box. Inevitably, I received a heap of Braille letters from the truly sightless. I briefly considered their cloistered seclusion, locked in their private darkness with their awkward typewriters, etching the regular protrusions of their pain into the thickset paper. I didn't respond to a single one of them, of course. They failed the test of deciphering my ad. Besides, I don't read or write Braille. Nor am I blind, I am merely lonely.

Some letters indicated a modicum of understanding of my situation. All manner of sensitive women who reacted with undisguised arousal to my veiled challenge. They desperately clung with manicured nails to the vestige of a hope that I may choose them from among the hundreds and the thousands of respondents. I could feel the effort that went into the razored folding of the paper, experience the panic in the curlicued letters.

At the end, I did pick one. I sat there, ranking them by traits that I deemed of indispensable importance as far as I am concerned. I scored them with meticulous objectivity on a scale of 1 to 10, added the points each had received and came up with Jezebel (9 points in all). Unusual name - nay, unforgettable. At any rate, with the Bible on her side, she struck me as a safe bet. Besides, I consoled myself, what could go wrong with such a name?

Partly to find out, I left my voice in her answering machine. Her message served only to enhance my interest. She sounded like a femme fatale, the kind that makes trouble merely by momentarily flashing the snowy and wrinkled confluence of her armpits and her breasts. That's how she sounded, like lots of smoke and lots of mayhem, or like an alcoholic, I wasn't really sure. But I sure wanted to be. So, I picked up the receiver and there she was, at the other end of the optic fiber, at the speed of the focused light that bonded us in real time. Well, almost.

The pleasantries that we exchanged were starkly contradicted by the hoarseness of her voice. We argued half-heartedly about the venue of our first encounter, nothing serious and she graciously succumbed, registering a point in her favor. Already I am in debt and we haven't even met.

I decided to be me and put on a T-shirt, the taut promise of virginal flesh with hints of silky and occult hair. A T-shirt is kind of an ad proclaiming: this is what I am like under my scant clothing, it may be worth your while to undress me. With this attire I attended our first assignation. And with summer footwear showing only the merest intimations of tiny, sculpted toes. Oil-slicked mane, part shaven stubble and I was ready.

In the fashionable cafe, no one reproached me for my sartorial transgressions. I leaned my back on the humungous glass entrance. It provided for a perfect observation post. I liked to pose as a Mossad agent, or something equally intoxicating, now embroiled in the mission of a lifetime, adhering to the regulations and procedures that will extricate me from this inadvertent hell. Real spies probably hate all these well-rehearsed, automatic, wearily familiar motions. So what? Do they improvise instead? Could be. I, not being a veritable spook (people's counterfactual perceptions notwithstanding), simply wouldn't know. But my posture sometimes misleads. Especially the girls. Nothing explicit, mind you: an imperceptible tilt of the head with an almost-wink will do.

So, now I stood like that, in my secret agent posture, scanning the place through my nearly computerized eyes (imposing a conjured digital square rangefinder on my field of vision). I couldn't see her. Couples and whole families took over the entire space, tables possessed by businessmen in the throes of lively arguments coupled with intimidating body language.

Small wonder she joined me from behind. If she were really a ravishing Russian spy she could have easily stabbed me in the back, for instance, or popped me with a silenced gun, or wasted me with a weapon I never even heard of.

What she did say stunned me so that I neglected to notice her looks. She uttered: "I also play this game sometimes".

I mumbled back "What game?" because I was shocked and I didn't dare to believe it. Well, alright, she didn't get it one hundred percent. She expounded: "Cops in pursuit of dangerous criminals" and that was a miss, as I was playacting an intelligence officer, matching wits with foreign spies, each of us fighting for a cause we believe to be both good and decent. But it was still nice that

she noticed the make-belief at all and, coming to think about it, cops and robbers was not that far from rival espionage rings.

So I took it as an impressive omen. My fucking brain that doesn't let go of me even when I climax, revved into instant action. I was amazed at the extent of information buried in her impoverished six-words sentence. Cops and dangerous criminals inhabit a hostile universe of constant struggle, violence, and terror. This must be her world as well, I am a great believer in the revelatory nature of first utterances.

And what were my first words? Silence. I said zilch, nada, nothing. Having deconstructed her introductory syllables, I began to survey her, limb by limb. It goes without saying that she was perfect. Her single, dazzling pronouncement rendered me momentarily half-blind. No one - and I mean no one - ever offered me such a penetrating insight, definitely not in the first few seconds we have met. Relationships with most people develop unexpectedly: they start off wearily. This anticipatory tediousness causes separation and excites the energies of dedicated love that the fear of loss provokes. Where are these passions when needed to prevent the breakup in the first place? I moved to contemplate her feet.

Nothing interests me in a woman more than her feet. Jezebel (it was she, I presume, even though we weren't formally introduced yet) rested with perfect equipoise and let me scrutinize her semi-nude feet at length. She wasn't embarrassed at all by the fact that we were blocking the only entrance and were being pestered and shoved by people who then apologize reproachfully. She didn't show the slightest inclination to shuffle one millimeter from her obstructive spot until I am done with my inspection.

She was wearing thongs of Japanese delicacy. Her curvaceous, pearly feet broke out of this nearly emblematic confinement, voluptuously maddening. I could fall in love with a woman just for her feet and Jezebel had a perfect pair: not too mannish and not too infantile.

When I recovered, I looked her in the face and she smiled thinly but not haughtily, her eyes rising with her eyebrows firmly affixed and this, too, was a novelty because usually it is the other way around with eyes and eyebrows. This subtle pantomime was more expressive than any question and I motioned expansively and followed her onto a vacated table for two.

We were seated (I offered her the chair) and she grinned once more. I was dazed by the vocabulary of her smiles. She liked my chivalry, but I expected it. Women's lib and all that jazz aside,

they love it when we evince our servitude. I let a ripple of hostility sweep over me and then it's gone.

"I am Jezebel" - she said and her voice had qualities obscured by telephony. It was deep, nearly masculine, and, usually, I didn't find such voices appealing in the least, but hers I loved. It occurred to me with startling immediacy that - for a first date which haven't yet begun - I fancied too many of her qualities. I also found her face to be exquisite and I decided to tell her that, what have I got to lose. In general, I settle on a stream of consciousness. I articulate the first things that come into my mind. I am tired of the masquerade of "Listen, I am the catch of a lifetime, successful, perfect, smart and so on". I told her that as well.

She threw back her head (where did this mane come from?) and chuckled wholeheartedly. And when I say "wholeheartedly" I mean that everyone must have heard her, the way people were gaping at us. It filled my heart with pride that I can make such a gorgeous girl laugh and I was reminded of studies that prove that a sense of humor is an important part of interpersonal attraction.

"I love the texture of your skin" - she blurted, staring unabashedly at my shoulders and how they slope away, in gentle folds, into my armpits. I felt self-conscious and I thought to myself that I wished the conversation, if there were to be any, would be a trifle more cerebral.

"You want to talk" - she sighed and leaned back, making me aware for the first time of the proximity she just abandoned - "What do you want to talk about?"

I glared at her, desperately recalling everything I ever read about mind-reading and telepathy. Either my face is see-through translucent or she was a witch. Her fiery hair made the latter option by far the more probable. I didn't want to consider the third possibility: that she had been on many blind dates and that all males react the same. And I mean the exact same way.

"You study anything?" - I enquired and she made a show of unclasping a black purse, pulling out a box of cigarettes, extracting one, diving for a lighter, and failing to make it work. Finally, her cigarette ablaze, she exhaled a measured puff of smoke. She weighed my query for awhile and then responded:

"Depends what you mean. I learn all the time, even in this meeting."

I tried to counter when, suddenly, she violently crushed the butt in the fancy metal ashtray.

She glowered, lids lowered, at the smoldering remnants until they embered and then looked at me again. I could literally see the clash of various considerations in her mind, her indecision.

"Look,"- she declared- "I am a great fan of clicking and chemistry. I even believe in love at first sight. What about you?"

I told her that I, too, am a believer in the power of biology. She swept aside my intellectualization impatiently: "What does it matter, why it exists as long as it does!" We agreed on that.

"So, I would say that in our case, it is love at first sight" - she summed flatly, as though she were reporting the outcome of an inordinately complex chess match. As though this "fact" had equal standing with all others (for instance, with the fact that we have ordered nothing to eat or drink).

It all became so clear. Some sentences possess the power to rearrange reality and abruptly illuminate the scene. You see things you haven't known even existed. They call it "explanatory power" in philosophy of science. Her words had such an effect on me. Hitherto, it has all been so opaque, the way I felt and how I regarded various parts of this tryst.

But when I examined the sentence "I am in love", it shed light all around. I have a predilection towards "key phrases", the kind that, not unlike some magic spells, capture the entire world in its embryonic state.

I am in love. Yes, this could serve as a sufficient explanation for what was happening between us and inside me. But, was this also a necessary one? In other words: couldn't there be another interpretation that arranged the universe so that it acquired meaning, cause, and a goal - without resorting to the assumption that I am enamored of her?

An organizing principle, this is what I really needed urgently - either this, or an all-consuming infatuation, the kind that Jezebel was clearly offering by employing plural pronouns. She didn't say: Look, you are in love and that is why you take in reality the way you do. No. She said: "In our case, it is love at first sight." In our case. Evidently, she found this choice of words equally enlightening.

So what can one do with a girl who confides in you this way? We rose from the table without ordering and with no bill to pay. I left a crumpled note to the baffled waitress and we went to my place to fuck.

In the silence after (the clocks ticking louder than usual), Jezebel lit a smoke and so did I. It had the hallmarks of a dead end because fucking is supposed to be the culmination, not the

opening act. What can two people do after sex that is as potent and as telling?

They cohabit, I assume. Time is as powerful as coitus. So, I offered and she accepted and she bent towards me, her breasts dangling but firm, pressed into my flaccid chest, and butterfly-kissed my eyelids, licking my bushy eyebrows and the bridge of my prominent nose into the bargain. That was her way of saying "I do."

We cohabited. We transformed our bodies into dual playgrounds, each day discovering new installations. Our brains fused and rarely did I have to complete my sentences. Or hers. We strolled, hands clasped, rubbing shoulders, thighs, and hips on every opportunity.

I thought this must be happiness and most probably it was. We did everything together but knew how to feel alone. We shared the same tastes and generally agreed about most issues. We took old-fashioned care of each other when we were ill and did the same when we were not. She, for instance, surprised me with my favorite flavored teas in the most unexpected moments and it felt like receiving a gift on a non-birthday. I couldn't see enough of her - though, as time passed, I loved her more like one does one's childhood books and intimate, time-worn furnishings. I believe that she reciprocated, that's what her eyes communicated when we made love.

Perhaps I should not have been so taken aback when she announced that she is leaving, that she has someone else. Perhaps I really wasn't. I think that the problem was less the element of surprise than the all-pervading hurt.

I sat on our crumbling leather loveseat, a puppet without its master, the strings torn from my skin, bleeding their way out. I cried a lot and begged, but, all that time, I knew that this is leading nowhere, that it is only a question of time, and not a lot of it.

I was like a cancer patient whose nights are numbered. I would wake up and gaze at her asleep for hours. I knew she was making it with someone else and I replayed their torrid copulations over and over again. Her part was easy to imagine. I knew what she liked done and I saw no reason why he would not oblige, if only to make her entire edifice moan and purr. Whenever I think of things I did or got wrong, I shut tight my eyes and pucker my face. Sometimes I whistle or repeat a mantra or say something in Nazi. That's how I exorcise my shame and guilt. I did it often now.

Solitude again. It is far more onerous after togetherness. Coming to think of it: why was it so easy being alone before? Isn't it

strange? Togetherness probably has an elusive component that is addictive. Loneliness feels like the panic of a patient whose medication ran out and there is no way of obtaining more or substitutes. Every object and every sound and music and the occasional street cry are like handles attached to pain-stuffed drawers. I drowned in their content.

My friends embarked on another round. I started to feel like Job. They said: "Listen, if you don't circulate and meet girls ... They won't just come here, you know! You've got to go the extra mile, literally and figuratively. You've got to make an effort if you don't want to be lonely!"

When they departed, I boiled some tea and, admittedly, it didn't taste the way it did before. There is some ingredient in loving hands that alters the very attributes of the world. But it was still tea and it was sweetened with low-fat milk. I drank it hesitantly at first and then more avidly and then gulped it down voraciously. When I was done, I wiped my lips with upturned hand and inspected with mild interest the moistened outcome. It reminded me of a woman.

I think I already knew the answer. Thus, that lonely night with a flaming sword which turned every way inside my guts, I recognized my truth. I went over to the panoramic view torn in the living room of this once-cohabited apartment. I looked down at the grayish, indecisively truncated street. All manner of figures crossed it, clad in T-shirts and denims. Fossilized in pain, they were beyond the reach of even the most loving and well-meaning.

And this is precisely what I came to understand: that love is no insurance policy. It's not even a promise. It can't predict a single forward move. Salvation is only one of many options, not the inevitable outcome. This realization did not make me happier, it really didn't. But it sure made me stronger.

I dimmed the piercing halogen light, placed a Brahms in the DVD player, sprawled on our tattered leather armchair, letting its coolness penetrate me. Eyes shut, I counted the times I listened to this oeuvre. I soothed myself: "Listen, you have known yourself for many years now. You are an OK guy, all considered. Don't you think we are going to make it?"

And I added: "Actually, why involve others in this love affair between me and myself? Entre-nous, who will love me like I do. who will spoil me unconditionally and with whom can I be so open? And if these are not the determinants and dimensions of true love, what are?"



The more I contemplated this, the more I knew I hit upon the quintessence, I stumbled across the right decision, I faced incomparable attachment.

I hugged my shoulders with my own, dry, warm hands and tilting my head to one side, I kissed and gently bit one rounded hill and then another in tender foreplay.

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# Nothing's Happening at Home

By Sam Vaknin

Mother tells me not to say anything at school about what is happening at home. Nothing is happening at home. Come morning, I wake up from my restless sleep and either I wetted my bed or I didn't. If I did, mother silently packs off my soaked pajamas and the damp sheets, casting a harsh glance at the black stain that seeps into the bed's upholstery. The house already reeks and she opens the shutters and lays the linen on the window panes, half out and the dry half in.

I get dressed and brush my teeth. I stare at my feet that are the shape of irons and conceal them, standing on one naked foot and then another, enthralled by their curvaceous obesity. The white paste and my saliva swirl in my mouth and drip on my undershirt in odoriferous stripes. I have bad breath but I don't know it yet. Nir will tell me and then I will. I frown and pull the polluted garment away, as though I could undress horizontally instead of vertically, hands stretched upwards. It turns dark for a moment and scary so I scream. And this is how I earn today's first slap. Mother dumps the soiled underthings in the gaping laundry pale. Her eyes are desperate. I am not a successful kid. I am ugly and immature and I have an eggplant nose ("berengena" in Ladino). I rub my hurting cheek and put on the sky blue school uniform shirt and trousers. I don't know how to tie my shoelaces. Instead of slender butterflies I get knotted caterpillars, bound larva, repulsive insects with two plastic tipped antennas. My mother is taking care of my small sister. I wait patiently. She sighs and places the baby on the bed. She steps towards me and I recoil because I don't know how mad I made her. I am not sure what it's going to be this time. Sometimes she just groans and ties the laces with one incisive motion but at other times she pinches me real hard and we are both mum and my blood streams down to her nip until the place acquires shades of black, and blue and deep purple. She doesn't have to tell me to roll down my sleeves. I do it. The dirty laundry of this family stays at home. Our secrets are ours and no one else's. Sometimes I

imagine us like a fortress and the enemy would kill to learn all kinds of things about us but we are not going to let it, no way. We will protect each other and we will hold them back.

On the days that mother washes the house, I withdraw to a corner and I imagine a mighty army, shooting arrows from all kinds of cracks and casements and I see a hero and he is fighting empty-handed in a variety of martial arts and he wins. Cooped up in an angle, the dirty water churning around me, rivulets of our effluence, revolting strands of hair and nail clippings. Then she spreads a tattered blanket in the tiny balcony and turns on the radio and we listen to the Program for the Mother and Child, Listen now you lovely kids, our program is complete and she brings me a big bowl of fruits and I eat them and feed my sister, too.

When the shoelaces business is over, I turn my back to her and await the heft of my schoolbag and I exit without saying goodbye or so long or anything. She yells after me to be careful how I cross the street, there are cars, and to be wary of children, don't let them beat you. Once, a stranger lifted me on his shoulders and asked me to read aloud the names on the mailboxes. We went through many buildings, him and me. He told me that he was looking for some family. When I returned home, they shouted at me something awful and warned me not to associate with strangers because they are dangerous, this is a fortress and we are in it. Even our extended family don't visit. Mother and father don't like it when they do. They set a table with all kinds of alcoholic drinks and non-alcoholic beverages that we, the children are allowed to consume but mother's eyes follow everyone to see if they have touched anything and she doesn't like at all the mess they make, these guests.

I don't pee at school because the urinals are not clean or something. I don't remember why, I just know not to pee. Mother tells me not to hold back, it isn't healthy but I abstain on purpose. I want to pee at home. When I come back, mother doesn't let me visit the restroom to get sorted out. That's how we call it, "sorted out". It's a word the teacher Mina taught us, she said that it is not nice to pee, better to get sorted out. Mother adores this word and it became compulsory, because we are not allowed to use foul language. So I ask permission to get sorted out and mother takes a broom to me and beats me forcefully on the back and all the neighbors stand at the entrance door and watch and I pee on myself and on the floor is this large yellow puddle in which I stand. Mummy's broom gets all wet and the neighbors laugh and mother sends me away to change my clothes, perhaps now I will

learn not to hold back at school. She takes down my trousers and I am exposed to the jeering crowd, drenched and naked. It isn't a good day, this one. I read all evening and I read at night and I read during the morning. I read a lot throughout this not so good day.

Mother could have been a famous author or an important actress but instead she had us and did not become one. She became a housewife. There is a lot of sadness and a lot of anger when she tells us that and also how once she appeared in a play as Pook the naughty dwarf and everyone complimented her and urged her to join a professional troupe. She couldn't do it because she was working in a shoe store on Mount Carmel to support her father and her mother who didn't love her at all because she was boyish. She wore her hair like a boy and dressed like a boy and was as daring as a boy and she gulped huge quantities of salty soup and three loaves of bread when she came back from work at the shop owned by the Yekkes (German-Jews) whom she admired. When I was born, the radio broadcast the proceedings of the Eichmann trial and she called me "My Little Eichmann" but that was only in jest. These Yekkes with their order and efficiency and table manners and how she studied German and they all admired her in return. And now this: a wailing baby and the dripping bed sheets of her first born (you are not a child anymore!) already six years old and must grow up and her fingernails gouging my veins on the inside of my arm and all my blood rushing towards her and staining and she stares down at her hand, a glimmer in her eyes wide open and I slowly extract my arm from her grasp and she does not resist it. She just sighs and brings some stinging violet iodine and smears it on the lacerations. After some time they scar and all that remain are pale and elongated mother traces.

So now I am reading and am in all my imaginary kingdoms and writing horror poems that mother finds and stashes on a towering cupboard to make me stop it because it's sick and she doesn't want to see it again. She tears the books I borrow from the public library and flings them out of the concrete bars that frame our laundry room where we also dine on a tiny wooden table. Through these bars she tears my realms apart and down to the shriveling grass and I leave everything and gallop downstairs because I am afraid that by the time I get to my shredded books someone will abscond with them or the wind will scatter them or the rain. I find them prostrate and wounded and I salve them with my spit to heal them like mother's purple iodine. I think that maybe my saliva will glue them back thick as it is but they remain the same, only now their torn pages are also damp. Back at home father and I

sellotape the ruptured leaves and when I go to the library, I say all kinds of lies or put on an innocent face so that the librarian Shula will not flip through it and see our shoddy handicraft, my father's and my own, even though he has golden hands and fixes everything at home. But I keep reading, sometimes five whole books a day. I am completely uninterested in their content. I don't read even one of them to its end, skip numerous paragraphs, don't even finish thrillers or mysteries. Just scan the pages, dimly aware of the words and father says to mother when she curses me under her breath, what do you want from him, you don't understand him at all and who can, he doesn't belong to us, he is from another planet. I weep when I hear these words, my silent tears, not the cries I give out when I am beaten and not the self-indulgent whimpering and see how ugly you are when you are like that. No, this is a true release between me and my pillow and I feel then how poor they are and how much I should pity them and not the other way around, because I am not from this world and I don't belong and they have to raise me all the same. Even though they are proud of me because I am a star pupil and give the keynote addresses in all the school and municipal events and declare open and closed all the ceremonies and from a tender age I had the voice of a radio announcer and am a prodigy with a bright future. Mother herself tells me that when we sit around the table and she looks my age she is so young and with a boyish haircut and pink, taut skin on her high cheekbones. She says that she is proud of me but not to let it go to my head, but there is a change in her attitude towards me, like a new fear, like I am out of the fortress now, unpredictable, from another world and don't belong.

She used to tell us about Gamliel the Sage and his adventures that always had an object lesson with his scrawny and miserable goat and his stupid neighbors that he always tricked and we would beg, mother mother, more and she graciously consented and those were afternoons of magic and I felt no need to read, only to listen to the stories of the Sage and his donkey and his son and his goat and to sip from that sweetened peach-flavored drink she made us.

But then she would say enough and ask who touched the refrigerator and we would say not we but she knew. She always pointed at us and said that we had touched the refrigerator and we know we mustn't and how her life is being ruined by the need to clean after us and then the beatings, the beatings. All our body.

In the middle of the apartment we have a floor-to-ceiling metal divider. Father welded it together from metal leaves and metal vines and stuck a small aquarium full of teeny fish and water and a

plastic diver that gives off bubbles and all kinds of shells and fine ground sand. Every morning, father gets up and spreads smelly aquarium food with callused fingers over the bubble-troubled water, rusty flakes that sink like feathers straight into the gaping jaws of the frenetic fishes. Every week one of them would remain stuck at the bottom or float and the others would snap at it and we know it is dead and it is bloated too. At night, I sleep across from this divider, on the side that mother forbids to enter during the day and the flickering light emitted by the electric all souls candle illuminates the diver and the inky water and his loneliness and the bubbles and everything and I watch it all until I fall asleep. Come morning, the room beyond the divider is off-limits, only mother is scrubbing and carefully dusting the nightly build-up off the expensive Formica furniture. I am the only one who sleeps there at night, facing the television set. Even guests are asked to watch this black-and-white wonder from the outside. Until my bedtime, I sit overlooking them all but don't take my socks off not to show my feet like irons and I hope not to wet the sheets in front of everyone, anything but that. Mother passes cookies to old Monsieur Yossef from Turkey who talks incessantly. And so I doze off amidst the sounds of the TV and of Monsieur Yossef. I have bad dreams and listen to mother and father arguing I will pack my suitcases and leave you all tomorrow, feel free, mother says, feel free to go. Tomorrow he doesn't. He gets up at the middle of the night to go to work and before he departs he straightens our blankets and I think that maybe he kisses my cheek or forehead somehow, otherwise how did his stubble scrape me it must have been a kiss.

The next day father brings me books from the library of the Union of Construction Workers in Haifa that I never visit. I do go with him to attend lectures at the Union and I ask the lecturers smart questions and everyone is amazed and so is dad. He inflates the way he always does when he is proud of me. Now in the book he brought me there is a story about a king and clothes and a kid who has the guts to cry even though it is the monarch and everything: "The King is Naked". I read it a couple of times like I don't believe that some kid will shout such a thing about the king and what happened to him afterwards, surely he was scratched and pinched at least to death. I contemplate his iron-like feet, petite and rosy when he ascends to the gallows and how his head rolls sprinkling gore all over the crowd but everything is frozen and no one cheers like in the movies about the French revolution. Everyone gapes at this kid's lips through which he said that the

King is Naked. There is something empowering and hopeful in this, as though a goodhearted old fellow with long hair bends over me because he notices that I am small and that I am bleeding profusely from my arms and he gives me this magic spell, this faith.

I open my eyes and I see that mother has a kerchief on her head, like she always wears when she is dusting. She notices my stare but she sings boisterously and I know that I am unnerving her by watching her do her chores. I know that soon she will mete out what a child like me deserves.

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# Alice: Ten Years Later

By Sam Vaknin

“Ten year anniversaries are nothing to sneeze at”, thought Alice as she surveyed the kitchen. Sure enough, someone sneezed vociferously and insistently just to her left.

“Have I been thinking aloud?” enquired Alice, alarmed.

“No more than usual,” answered the cook, “and the soup decidedly begs for more pepper, you know.”

Exasperated, Alice rolled her eyes (a gesture she mastered only recently and was very proud of): “This time, I came armed with the recipe, Cook,” she admonished her sternly, “Here, read for yourself: not a trace of pepper to be had throughout the proceedings!”

“Impossible!” declared Cook and eyed her suspiciously. She snatched the tattered page, perused it awhile and then read it aloud, triumphantly:

Disconcerted by this decisive rebuttal of her new-found bravado, Alice settled on a three-legged stool which stood smack in the geometric navel of the kitchen.

“When will everyone be here?” she mused to no one in particular.

“Precisely when they will arrive!” bellowed Cook and hauled the sooty cauldron onto the fire - “The Cat’s grin has been here since the morning!”

“Is there anything else on the menu?” enquired Alice “I am mighty hungry and don’t think I can quell it with a mere dollop! And the pepper is bound to make everyone so thirsty, not to mention sneeze-prone!”

Cook grunted absentmindedly: “March Hare promised to bring some wine. And to drag in Dormouse, if he is not asleep, of course.”



“Dormouse is always asleep” sighed Alice “and March Hare doesn’t know the first difference between wine and tea!”

“Wine, tea” snorted Cook as she hurried around in a haze of pepper “It’s all the same to me. It should be all the same to you, you know, makes life considerably simpler!”

“Things can go awfully wrong if you don’t call them by their proper names” insisted Alice “Consider this recipe for chicken in wine. It wouldn’t be the same with tea, I grant you!”

Cook eyed her pityingly: “It wouldn’t be the same with a different chicken, too, but we don’t make a fuss about it now, do we?” Still, she grabbed the torn piece of newspaper and read it avidly, smacking her thick and peppered lips as she went along:

“Sounds delicious!” she concluded “Although I dare say that Chicken might have an entirely different view on the matter if chickens were capable of having views, that is!”

Alice shuffled her feet restlessly.

“Is the Hatter coming?” she asked wistfully - “And Rabbit? Oh, I remember those days so fondly!”

“I am sure those days remember you in the very same manner, dear” mumbled Cook as she rushed from one end of the impossibly long counter to the other for no proper reason.

A knock on the door disrupted Alice’s reverie.

“Where is the footman?” asked Alice “Shouldn’t he be here to answer the door? Isn’t this what makes him the footman?”

“Oh, he is no longer in our employ, ever since the Duchess lost her head, you know. Now, I have to do everything around here by my busy, sorry self and that includes opening the door. Luckily, I have to do so only when someone knocks on it.” She trudged towards the entrance and Alice thought to herself, hopefully not aloud: “How advanced in age she had become! ‘Tis so sad!”

But the years have done little to effect the ponderous trio that burst upon the kitchen: they all looked as though it were just

yesterday. The Hatter dropped a brownish packet on the counter and spread his arms to encompass Alice in a hearty hug. “My dear!” he exclaimed “But, you haven’t changed a bit! Are you on better terms with Time?”

“I am afraid not!” admitted Alice “I find it ... him ... inexorable.”

“As uncivil as ever! “ cried the Hatter with evident delight “I so love it when things stand still, don’t you?”

“And how is your watch?” Alice made polite chitchat.

“Who wants to know?” demanded the Hatter

“Why, I do, since I am the one who asked the question!” countered Alice indignantly.

“Here we go again!” It was the March Hare who just entered, dragging by his tiny feet the slumbering Dormouse “You are at it exactly as you were ten years ago!”

He dropped the Dormouse onto the dusty floor unceremoniously and waved his ears at Alice: “I brought the best butter with me ...”

“With breadcrumbs, I presume” grumbled the Hatter, removing his watch from harm’s way.

“And a recipe for butter and breadcrumbs to go with it!” concluded the Hare unperturbed. With conspicuous pride, he handed a tiny piece of parchment to Alice.

“Buttered breadcrumbs recipe” - read Alice aloud - “Serve as garnish or on top of casseroles”

“Serves you right!” snapped the Hare - “Give me that!” and he lunged at the vellum and unfolded it, pronouncing its contents for all to hear:

“So, we have us a soup ...” counted Alice on her fingers

“With pepper to boot!” interjected the harried Cook, storming the kitchen from one extremity to another and back again.

“ ... and we got us the garnish ...”

“And good wine!” yelled the Hare, waving a huge kettle precariously close to Alice’s head.

“ ... and tea! Now all we need are some vegetables of sorts and a desert would be nice.” Alice reminisced: “I remember the mushroom I ate here on my last visit!”

“And so does the caterpillar!” - hurrumphed the Dormouse (inasmuch as Dormice hurrumph, of course) and went back to snooze.

“One should never consume another’s abode, you know, it is distinctly not civil” advised the Hare, addressing himself to no one in particular “The poor caterpillar and his hookah ended up homeless which is not how caterpillars suppose to end at all!”

“Is he coming to our anniversary reunion?” asked Alice breathlessly - “I should really like to see him again. We had the most enlightening conversations before I ate his home!”

“Oh, he is coming alright!” contributed the Dormouse “And bringing with him ...” But he lapsed into dozing and the sentence remained somewhat unfinished.

“Mushrooms?” suggested Alice, but the somnolent Dormouse was not amenable to her proposal.

“I can’t think what else he can bring along, unless it is his hookah, which we are not wont to eat both because most hookahs are not edible and because it is the only possession he has left, the poor thing!” Alice said tearfully.

“The goose” said the Dormouse “He is bringing with him the goose from ‘You Are Old, Father William’ and some mushrooms to go with it. He felt he owed you at least that much after he has ravaged your recitation of the poem on your last encounter.”

“That was rude of him” smiled Alice “But I hold no grudge.”

“How can you hold something like a grudge? It has to parts to seize!” trumpeted the Hatter and plopped his hat jauntily. H

“I so wish Rabbit were here! I forgot how you all so love to argue whether it is called for or not!” she stamped her foot but then recalled her age and being an adult wished she hadn’t.

“Rabbit is always late” said Cook “He has got to gather up some orange marmalade. I am told that it is not an easy thing to do when all the jars on all the shelves are empty.”

“What can one do with a goose, some orange marmalade, and mushrooms?” wondered Alice. This query proved to be a costly error as each of the occupants of the now smoke-filled kitchen erupted with permutations of the three unfortunate ingredients which would have surely caused the goose considerable discomfort if not outright distress.

“Silence in the Kitchen!” cried a familiar voice from the entryway. Someone left the door ajar, probably March Hare.

“Rabbit!” - Alice rushed toward the familiar, plump, white figure, wrapped her hands around him and gave him a vigorous twirl.

Dazed, he surveyed the scene: “Is everyone here? Should I sound the trumpet? Shall we be late?” And, then, as though awaking from a stupor, he fumbled in his waistcoat-pocket, dropping to the ground a watch. Alice bent down, picked it up and handed it back to him, not before she saw how worn and patina-ridden it had become.

“Thank you, your majesty!” the Rabbit offered solemnly - “We can now proceed to cross-examine the goose.” And with this somewhat perplexing pronouncement, he handed to Alice a sheet of seemingly expensive creamy stationery.

“It’s a recipe!” - Alice waved the paper excitedly - “It’s what we have been lacking all along: a recipe for goose breast glazed with marmalade and garnished mushrooms!”

“Give me that!” blurted Cook “In the kitchen I am king and country, or, rather” she corrected herself sheepishly “queen and country”.

“Here you are!” yielded Alice “I have always taken a great interest in questions of eating and drinking, you know. I didn’t mean to overstep my boundaries - or yours.”

The last to arrive was the caterpillar. Alice couldn’t spot his alleged homelessness: he was as nattily attired as when she first met him and the hookah dangled from a ravishing leaf-belt that encircled his now sizable girth. He nodded in her direction coolly and all but ignored everyone present except Cook to whom he presented one goose resigned to its fate and a giant head of mushroom, drawn and quartered expertly.

“Madam,” he uttered languorously “the goose.” A caterpillar of few words he was and those he always chose with care.

“You haven’t changed a bit” Alice ventured. He sized her up sleepily and said: “I didn’t have a bit to start with, so obviously I haven’t changed it.”

Alice felt vertiginous. It was like falling through the rabbit-hole and back in time. Her mother called it *déjà-vu*. The caterpillar had a way of twisting her words so - but she couldn’t find anything to rebut him with: his logic was always so impeccable!

The Rabbit cleared his furry throat and announced officiously:

“We are gathered here ...”

“I this kitchen” insisted Cook

“In this kitchen” repeated Rabbit dutifully “to celebrate ten years since we first set eyes on Alice. She dropped into our world and into our hearts unbidden, like a dream, and she left us disconsolate. We missed you, Alice. Welcome back!”

“Hear, hear” said a voice from above, which was a bit incongruous: only the cat’s mouth appeared hitherto, but not his ears.

“Do make haste of it, Cheshire cat” begged Alice impatiently “We can’t all be treated to a lesson in feline anatomy! Time is running short.”

“What a curious expression” said cat, materializing in full precariously, just above her head.

“When I first laid eyes on you” - proceeded Cook seamlessly - “I thought to myself: ‘what a lost little thingie she is! That’s why I misled the king in his very own court when he asked me about the making of tarts! No way would I have allowed that murderous queen ...”

Rabbit flapped his ears in shock: “Hush, hush, she might hear you!” He forgot that the Queen had passed away the year after Alice left them. For Rabbit, it was as though time indeed stood still.

Alice bowed slightly: “Thank you, Cook! So, Dormouse was right was he? Tarts *are* made of treacle?”

“Of course they are!” sniffed the Dormouse derisively and rolled over.

“Treacle tarts are my specialty even if I say so!” beamed Cook “I supply the royal household to this very day, like my mother before me and her mother before her. At least I think so.” She furrowed her brow, contemplating this genealogical conundrum.

“And me!” bellowed Dormouse in between snores “She supplies me as ...” But he was fast asleep.

“I think we have the makings of a fine party here” declared the Hatter and the March Hare in rare unison “After all, we do have soup, a main dish of goose, chicken in wine, mushroom garnish, buttered breadcrumbs, and treacle tart! Let the cooking begin!”

And so it did.

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Basking in the glow of tallow candles, sated and inebriated, Alice and her olden friends relaxed around the elongated dining table and watched the fire flicker in the copper plated hearth.

“This was a party to remember” whispered Hatter.

“It was well worth waiting ten years for” concurred Rabbit.

Caterpillar unhooked his hookah and used a kindle to resuscitate it.

“Who are you?” he asked, his eyelids drooping, engulfed by the aromatic vapours.

“I am Alice” - Alice answered and the caterpillar smiled benignly and avuncularly.

“What do you mean by that? Explain yourself!” he urged her softly.

“I am Alice” she repeated “I study art. I love to travel and make new friends and help people. I have my own garden where I grow both flowers and vegetables. I enjoy sunsets, immersed in the palette of colours, silence all around. Sometimes I sit still and contemplate the days I passed here, among you and I realize I haven’t changed as much as I thought I would. I still love to eat and drink and when I am bored I daydream. I still love with my sister and read books with pictures, you see”.

“Yes, I see” sighed the caterpillar pensively “And can you remember things now?”

“Oh, much better” promised Alice and recited the entire “You are Old, Father William” flawlessly.

“That is quite right, it’s right from beginning to end” said the caterpillar and everyone smiled at Alice tenderly, even the Dormouse who woke up for the express purpose of doing so.

“Are you content now?” asked the caterpillar, puffing away on his embering hookah. Rabbit and Cook looked up expectantly as did the Hatter.

When she didn’t respond, the caterpillar stretched himself and looked straight into her eyes: “You don’t need a mushroom now, dear Alice” His voice was soothing and she just nodded, wiping happy tears from her eyes. In secret, so did everyone else in the room, even the caterpillar who pretended that hookah smoke was the culpable source of his sudden irritation.

“You can let us go, love” said Cook.

“You can bid farewell” pitched in the Hare.

“We are in your memories, we are you, forever mad, forever partying” added the Hare.

“We are your childhood” concluded the caterpillar “You can outgrow yourself, but never us.”

“It’s time for treacle tart” sniffed Cook and everyone cheered thrice and sat around Alice and extended their paws with empty plates for more. And so did she.

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# Arab Soothsayers Cannot be Trusted

By Sam Vaknin

Her papery thin hands clasp mine in a vise. “You will have three wives” - she rasps, her veil flutters with the exhalations. “The first two will give you great grief but no children. The third one will make you happy and your seed live on.” She reclines, depleted by her self-imposed exertion, a diminutive Arab relic of mummified old Jaffa. I look helplessly at Eli. He shrugs, a familiar glint in his eyes. We pay the dwarfish girl that ushered us in and bow out of the sage’s presence. “You are young”, Eli smirks, “You have time to prove her right, to get our money’s worth.” I am eighteen years old and have never been with a woman. I doubt if this particular prophecy will come to pass.

I remember that particular day and the Arab soothsayer when I watch her cajoling a pram with another man’s infant in it across the wet and pitted tarmac, 8 floors down. She is on her way to see me. We will make fervent, desperate love and then talk, the baby immersed in a whispered slumber at the corner of the bedroom. Her eyes grow misty grey with passion and in its wake settle into a hint of green. Her dainty body blushes as she bunches the ravaged sheets among her heaving breasts. She is another man’s but when we copulate, she is irredeemably mine.

She is not much of a talker, but when she does talk her insights are incisive. She has been conditioned to suppress her sparkling intellect under the guise of an ingénue’s naivety. She has always had a strained relationship with the truth and a vivid and deception-prone imagination. After all these years, I have come to learn that I know nothing about her. Not a thing. Like her nation, she is a mystery wrapped in an enigma in my bed, among the humid sheets.

She gazes at me furtively, assessing, evaluating, gauging risks and rewards like a seasoned actuary.

“So, what have you decided?” she enquires.

I shrug like Eli did all those decades ago. I feel my sagging age against her relative nubility, my supernumerary years like an unbridgeable abyss. The light just dimmed beyond the tightly drawn curtains (“What if someone is looking in or taking photos?”).

I sit facing away. She compliments my back, my shoulders, so I frequently offer them to her.

“I can’t leave him now”.

I laugh involuntarily but no longer bitterly.

“No, really. Not the way he is.”

I wave the tired argument away. I have heard it all before. I will go on hearing it, I know.

I swivel to face her, aware of the flabby deficiencies of my aging physique:

“Listen, you gave me life. You owe me nothing. You made me happy, more than I deserve, more than I thought possible. I told you years ago: you restored my trust in cosmic justice, in the balance of things. I suffered horribly all my life until I met you, but the time we had together since made up for it. My existence now is like a giant scale and it is fully poised.”

“Thank you,” she says, “It is nice to hear. I am glad I made you happy. I am glad I compensated somehow. But I cannot change my life now. I am not ready.”

I glance at the stirring, now yelping packet in the corner. She averts her eyes.

Silence and then she whispers contritely:

“I ruined your life.”

I never know if she is truly emoting or merely teasing out my reaction. I say nothing and her mood brightens up in that labile flux that is her quiddity:

“Let’s travel! Let’s have an adventure!” - she exclaims. I call her my Bambi and my Magic Unicorn and in such moments, when penumbral dusk gives in to night, she is ethereal and ephemeral and translucent like the spell that she has cast on me so long ago.

She springs out of the crumpled bed and stares at the twinkling screenface of her smartphone in disbelief: “I have to go!” She grabs haphazardly at her scattered attire, bouncing from one to the other in a kind of tribal dance she must have practiced with many men. I hate to think of her with other lovers, my discarded predecessors. I envy them her intimacy. I greedily hoard every shared memory and every jingle-bell laughter and every tear we shed. Her smells and tastes. And yet so much is still beyond my reach.

“You remember the old Arab soothsayer? The one who foresaw the three women in my life?”

She pauses, suspended in mid motion, then: “Sure”.

“She got it wrong.”

“Wrong?”

“She was right about the third woman and how happy she would make me. But she was wrong about the child and that this third woman will be my wife. She will never be mine. She is spoken for, another man had claimed and wouldn’t let go.”

She dismisses this observation airily, absent-mindedly: “We will see”. She is preoccupied, her brow furrowed. She is not into romance and what she disdainfully labels “poetry”. But I am a psychologist and I know better: it is a mechanism of defense against her own intensity. Or maybe I just want to believe that there is depth there, some resonance, a hint of vulnerable humanity.

Sometimes she surprises me with her erudition. She is well-read and a cinema buff. She leverages idioms from movies to illustrate her sentences. But mostly she is flighty, avoiding on purpose the deep and the profound, a mistress of concrete thinking, abhorring the abstract and the impractical.

She hops on one leg towards me, laughter coursing through her now partly concealed nudity. She kisses me on a tear-stained cheek and then, grabbing her bag, she approaches the pram and contemplates the child. “I hope she has my hands”, she mutters wistfully. She bends down and touches her lips to the baby’s damp forehead.

“It is very hot here. I have to really go now. I hope I didn’t forget anything like my watch.” She giggles.

And she is gone.

*The Suffering of  
Being Kafka*

**Poetry  
Of Healing and Abuse**

# Our Love Alivid

by Sam Vaknin

*Our bloated love alivid  
at the insolence of time  
protests by falling in,  
involuntarily committed.*

*You are the sadness  
in my sepia nights.*

*I am in yours.*

*We correspond across  
our dead togetherness.*

[Return](#)

## **Moi Aussi**

by Sam Vaknin

*I need to know you  
even as I never know my self  
that phantom ache  
of amputated innocence.*

*You,  
the stirrings of a curtain, dust  
settling on sepia cuckoo clocks  
covers obscuring.  
Perhaps one day you will become  
a benign sentence  
an agency  
through which to be.*

[Return](#)

## Cutting to Existence

by Sam Vaknin

*My little brother cuts himself into existence.  
With razor tongue I try to shave his pain,  
he wouldn't listen.  
His ears are woolen screams, the wrath  
of heartbeats breaking to the surface.  
His own Red Art.  
When he cups his bleeding hands  
the sea of our childhood  
wells in my eyes  
wells in his veins  
like common salt.*

[Return](#)



# A Hundred Children

by Sam Vaknin

*Tell me about your sunshine  
and the sounds of coffee  
and of barefeet pounding the earthen floor  
the creaking trees  
and the skinned memory of hugs  
you gave  
and you received.  
Sit down, yes, here,  
the intermittent sobbing  
of the shades  
slit by your golden face.  
Now listen to the hundred children  
that are your womb.  
I am among them.*

[Return](#)

# The Old Gods Wander

by Sam Vaknin

*Your promised lands  
with reticence.  
Grey, forced benevolence.  
They shrug their crumpled robes,  
extend in veinous hand  
black cornucopia.  
You're fighting back, it's evident,  
bony protrusions, a thumping chest,  
the clamming up of sweaty pearls.  
They aim at your Olympian head.  
There, in the meadows of your mind,  
grazing on dewy hurt,  
they defecate a premonition  
of impending doom.*

[Return](#)

# In the Concentration Camp Called Home

by Sam Vaknin

*In the concentration camp called Home,  
we report in striped pyjamas  
to the barefeet commandant,  
Our Mother orchestrating  
our daily holocaust.  
Burrowing her finger-  
-nails through my palms,  
a scream frozen between us,  
a stalactite of terror  
in the green caves of her eyes  
there, sentenced to forced labour:  
to mine her veins of hatred  
to shovel her contempt  
to pile scorn upon scorn  
beating(s) a path.  
At noon, Our Mother  
leads us to the chambers  
naked, ripples of flesh  
she turns on the gas  
and watches our hunger  
as her food devours us.*

[Return](#)

# The Miracle of the Kisses

by Sam Vaknin

*That night, the cock denied him thrice.  
His mother and the whore downloaded him,  
nails etched into his palms,  
his thorny forehead glistening,  
his body speared.  
He wanted to revive unto their moisture.  
But the nauseating scents of vinegar  
and Roman legionnaires,  
the dampness of the cave,  
and then that final stone...  
His brain wide open,  
supper digested  
that was to have been his last.  
He missed so his disciples,  
the miracle of their kisses.  
He was determined not to decompose.*

[Return](#)

# Fearful Love

by Sam Vaknin

*Cherubim turn swords,  
cast flaming fig leaves  
on a cursed ground.  
With bruised heels  
we labour  
among the bitten,  
festering fruits of our ignorance,  
making thorns and thistles  
of our crowns.  
In the sweat of our faces,  
a pheromonic resonance.  
In our dusty hearts,  
skinclad, in cleavage,  
we hope to live forever,  
flesh closed upon itself,  
conceiving sorrow.  
Our trees are pleasant to the sight  
of gold and onyxstone  
and every beast and fowl has its name  
except for our nakedness.  
In a garden of talking serpents,  
cool days and lying Gods,  
I betray you to the voice  
and hide.*

[Return](#)

# My Putrid Lover

by Sam Vaknin

*My lover dreams  
of acrid smells  
and putrid tangs  
I lick  
(dishevelled hair adorns)  
her feet  
I scale  
the shrink-warped body.  
I vomit semen  
that her lips ingest.  
And youth defies her.*

[Return](#)

## When You Wake the Morning

by Sam Vaknin

*When you wake the morning  
red headed children shimmer in your eyes.*

*The veinous map  
of sun drenched eyelids  
flutters  
throbbing topography.  
Your muscles ripple.  
Scared animals burrow  
under your dewey skin.  
Frozen light sculptures  
where wrinkles dwell.  
Embroidered shades,  
in thick-maned tapestry.  
Your lips depart in scarlet,  
flesh to withering flesh,  
and breath in curved tranquility  
escapes the flaring nostrils.  
Your warmth invades my sweat,  
your lips leave skin regards  
on my humidity.  
Eyelashes clash.*

[Return](#)

# Narcissism

by Sam Vaknin

*The Toxic  
waste of bottled anger  
venomised.  
Life belly up.  
The reeds.  
The wind is hissing  
death  
downstream,  
a river holds  
its vapour breath  
and leaves black lips  
of tar and fish  
a bloated shore.*

[Return](#)



## Prague at Dusk

by Sam Vaknin

*Prague lays over its inhabitants in shades of grey. Oppressively close to the surface, some of us duck, others simply walk carefully, our shoulders stooped, trying to avoid the monochrome rainbow at the end of the hesitant rain. Prague rains itself on us, impaled on one hundreds towers, on a thousand immolated golden domes. We pretend not to see it bleeding to the river. We just cross each other in ornate street corners, from behind exquisite palaces. We don't shake heads politely anymore. We are not sure whether they will stay connected if we do.*

*It is in such times that I remember an especially sad song, Arabic sounds interlaced with Jewish wailing. Wall after wall, turret after turret, I re-visit my homeland. It is there, in that city, which is not Arab, nor Jewish, not entirely modern, nor decidedly antique that I met her.*

*And the pain was strong.*

[Return](#)

## In Moist Propinquity

by Sam Vaknin

*Hemmed in our bed,  
in moist propinquity,  
'tis night and starry  
and the neighbourhood inebriated,  
in the vomitory of our street.*

*A woman,  
my stone-faced lover,  
a woman and her smells.  
The yellow haze of melancholy lampposts.  
Your hair consumes you.*

[Return](#)

# Prowling

by Sam Vaknin

*The little things we do together  
to give up life.*

*The percolating coffee,  
your aromatic breath,  
the dream that glues  
your eyelids to my cheek.*

*We both relent relentlessly.*

*Your hair flows to its end,  
a natural cascade,  
a velvet avalanche  
buries my hands.*

*In motion paralysed,  
we prowl each other's  
hunting grounds.*

*Day breaks, our backs  
turned to the light  
in dark refusal.*

[Return](#)

# Getting Old

by Sam Vaknin

*The sageing flesh,  
a wrinkled vicedom.  
The veined reverberation  
of a life consumed.  
On corneas imprinted  
with a thousand dreams,  
now stage penumbral plays  
directed by a sight receding  
and a brain enraged.  
To fall, as curtains call,  
to bow the last,  
rendered a sepia image  
in a camera obscured,  
a line of credits,  
fully exhausted,  
fully endured.*

[Return](#)

# Sally Ann

by Sam Vaknin

*I wrote, Sally Ann, I wrote:*

*Shot from the cannon of abuse  
as unwise missiles do.*

*Course set.*

*Explosive clouds that mark  
your video destination.*

*Experts interpret,  
pricking with laser markers,  
inflated dialects  
of doom.*

*Hitting the target, you  
splinter, a spectacle  
of fire and of smoke.*

*The molten ashes,  
the cold metallic remnants,  
the core...*

*A peace accord  
between you and your self.*

[Return](#)

# Selfdream

by Sam Vaknin

*At times, I dream myself besieged.  
I rebel with the cunning of the weak.  
I walk the shortcuts.  
Tormentors clad  
in blood-soaked black,  
salute as I manipulate them  
into realising their abyss.  
Some weep their sockets hollow,  
or waive their thorns.  
Much pain negotiated.  
A trading of the wounds.  
My chains carve metal  
and I am branded.*

[Return](#)

## Snowflake Haiku

by Sam Vaknin

*Where I begin  
your end  
snowflake haikus  
melt into  
crystalline awareness.*

*I guard  
your quivered sleep.  
Your skin beats moisture.  
The beckoning jugular  
that is your mind.*

*My pointing teeth.*

*A universe  
of frozen sharp relief,  
the icy darts your voice  
in my inebriated veins  
in yours.*

[Return](#)

# Twinkle Star

by Sam Vaknin

*Twinkle star  
of barren scape  
and ashen craters.  
Seething Ammonia winds.  
The fine dust  
of life forgone  
on surface tensioned.  
Beneath its crust  
trapped oceans surge  
in icy recollection.  
It hurls its core  
again the dimming sun's  
depleted inattention.*

[Return](#)



# Synthetic Joy

by Sam Vaknin

*Synthetic joy of wedding halls,  
caked bride and groom,  
a spewing orchestra,  
metallic rings.*

*Exchanging aqueous looks,  
thickset in exudate,  
the relatives.*

*Mother exuding age,  
a father pillaged by defeat,  
a clutch of wombless matrons.*

*The light is ashen,  
the food partitioned.*

*Soon, scene of soiled tables.*

*Soon, the relieved goodbyes.*

*Soon, the breathless breeding and the crumpled sheets.*

*The neon lights extinguished by the dawn.*

[Return](#)

## Tableaux (van Gogh)

by Sam Vaknin

*Listening to a scarlet sink, detached  
an ear, still glistening wax,  
in bloody conch.  
The gaping flesh.  
Wild scattered eyes  
fiercing the mirror.  
Light ricochets from trembling blade  
(it's gaslight evening and the breeze...)  
Behind his stooping shoulders,  
a painted room ablaze  
the dripping composition of his blood.  
The winding crowd  
inflates the curtains inwards,  
sails of a flying Dutchman.*

[Return](#)

# Hebrew Love

by Sam Vaknin

Ahavat ha'akher ena ela

Loving another is merely

ahavat ha'ani ba'akher.

Loving Myself in another.

Ba'akher ani:

In the Other I:

Khesronot

Shortcomings

Ke'evim

Pains

Nikudei turpa

Vulnerabilities

Kabala lelo hatnaya

the Unconditional Intercourse of

Ahavim.

Love.

Lehitama bahem

Subsumed

Ulehatmia.

Engulfing.

Ulam shel mar'ot,

A Hall of Mirrors,

Gvulut ben shtei aratsot nokhriot,

Two Bounded States,

Ir prazot

an Open City

vehaohev basha'ar,

my Lover at its gates,

Gesher khovek

a Bridge hugging

tehomot,

an abyss,

Migdal mamri, kulo safa belula,

a tower, heaven reached, wholly confounded language,

Mabul.

a Deluge.

Verak anakhnu,

And only Us,

Shnayim beteiva venoakh

two of a sort,

li velakh.

an Ark, a Covenant.

[Return](#)

# Her Birthday

by Sam Vaknin

## I. Apology ...

**My Wife:**

**Sometimes I watch you from behind:  
your shoulders, avian, aflutter.**

**Your ruby hands;  
the feet that carry you to me  
and then away.**

**I know I wrong You.**

**Your eyes black pools; your skin eruptions of what is  
and could have been.**

**I vow to make you happy, but  
my Hunchbacked Self  
just tolls the bells  
and guards you from afar.**

## II. ... And Thanks

**In the wasteland that is Me  
You flower.**

**Your eyes black petals strewn  
across the tumbling masonry.**

**Your stem resists my winds.**

**Your roots, deep in my soil,  
toil in murk to feed both you and me,  
to nurture Us.**

**And every day a spring,  
and every morn a sunshine:  
you're in my garden,  
you blossom day and night.**

**Your sculpted daint feels  
in my hands like oneness.**

## III. In Toronto

So much is left unsaid between us.  
Your crests of silence  
fallen on my shores of pain.

IV. Dedication (9<sup>th</sup> Edition of "[Malignant Self-love](#)")

My Wife:

You are in every carefully measured space,  
In every broken word  
That we had mended with  
The healing hyphens of our together-  
-ness.

This book, the memory of us,  
A record of survival  
Against all odds.

Malignant Self- gives way to love, two points, we are:  
Revisited.

V. Happy 2014 (dedication on the book  
"Macedonian Woodcarving")

Carved in the wood of our togetherness, entwined,  
the chiseled hurt of us:  
sprawled in your arms, my wounds  
and your iconic smile,  
Madonna of leaves and angels.  
Only one unicorn we are,  
sheltered behind the royal doors  
to our love. And you?  
My own Iconostasis.

VI. Dedication (10<sup>th</sup> Edition of "[Malignant Self-love](#)")

In the tenth edition of our lives, we:  
muscles aching,  
voices raised,  
backs bent upon  
the pain of editing the past.  
You in my studio, I in your night,

pecking at keyboards,  
nearsighted, glazed.  
And outside? Rain chases Sun  
and cats among narcissi  
and new life sprouts and old.  
We leave behind only these sheaves  
of paper children,  
off spring.

## VII. Remember Me

Very often, I cannot remember me.

But I remember that you make me happy.

You make me happy when:

We watch a film together

We eat your delicious food

We talk (and talk and talk)

You smile with enormous cheeks

I hold your delicate bird-like hand in mine

You run and stumble on the way to our bed

You talk to and agree with or argue with yourself

You make our apartment a home with gentle  
touch and souvenirs

You return at night, flustered, excited, loving



You listen to the birds, feed all the cats, talk to  
the dogs (they listen)

You make me very happy Lidija.

And this is why I am not back - because I never left.

In search for Sam, I am moving towards him - not away  
from you.

And in the dim, dreamlike existence that I lead,

in the turbulent whirlpool that I am,

a vortex and an apparition,

a sepia shadow of myself,

pure dust - from this nothingness,

for lack of another, better word, I feel.

I call it love. My love for you.

Having forgotten all else - even us - I remember only you,

and survive from one visit of yours to another,

knocking on echoed doors behind which I am not,

entombed,

scribbling furiously in a journal,

a diary that will never be written.

Your Sam

VIII. The Traveller

Forty days and forty nights the journey lasted. Over mountains, across seas and lakes, traversing plane and prairie. Until the wearied traveller, famished, fatigued, and parched fell to the ground in a foreign land and stirred no more.

He didn't know how long his stupor lasted but, when he woke up at last, he beheld the most marvellous flower he had ever seen: at once fragile and strong, scented and beautiful, its petals colourful and shimmering in the sun.

The flower nodded gently in the breeze, brushing against the traveller's bristled cheeks. Invigorated, the journeyman got up, found a stream of water, drunk from it, and washed himself. He picked low-lying fruits for his meal and all the time he eyed the tiny flower with wonderment and gratitude: it gave him life and hope and beauty.

Weeks passed and the traveller decided to return to his home. He made preparations: packed his meagre possessions, scooped water into a basket made of bark, and assembled fruits of all kinds into a blanket he has tied to a stick he had improvised from a fallen branch.

Time came to depart, but the traveller could not leave without his flower. He gently and lovingly dug it out, wrapped it carefully in an earth-filled kerchief and embarked on his way.

When he reached his destination, his family and friends marvelled at the flower. He bought a plot of land, cultivated it meticulously, to make a new home for his flower, the saviour of his life.

But, as the days turned into weeks and the weeks to months, the flower withered. Its petals dimmed and fell, its proud stem stooped, its scent diminished and then

vanished altogether. Perplexed and saddened, the traveller called upon the greatest botanist of the land and asked him to inspect the flower and render his opinion.

"No need" - responded the botanist - "for I have seen these things before. Some plants can flourish and thrive only in their native soil, where the right admixture of sunlight and water is available, where insects indigenous to these parts help them reproduce. Only there these flowers giveaway their natural gifts: their beauty and their scent. If you really love this flower, take it back to where you found it. Give it its life back as it has given you yours!"

And the traveller who loved the flower greatly did just that.

Never doubt my love for you, my beautiful flower and my life.

Sam, your traveller

10/8/2007---> forever

IX. 1138 – A Love Poem

On our rented porch,  
above the starlit city,  
the Sun sets in refracted wine.  
We sip the silence,  
quivering limbs entwined.  
Pain harks to pain.

Bloodied

Beaten

Weary

Torn

We explore each other's  
shrines, like pilgrims

in the holy land  
of our Love.

## X. Crimson Marriage

In your work-weary hands  
you drew the squarish box  
sheathed in crimson velvet  
and you asked:

"Do you know what this is?"

"No," brows raised.

"It is your wedding ring,  
but it doesn't fit you"

(When I finally tried it on after  
15 years of naked finger).

And there was such resignation in your voice  
as you contemplated with ashen eyes  
this patinated relic of our  
fading union.

The marriage I buried in the squarish box  
sheathed in crimson velvet.

# THE AUTHOR

## Shmuel (Sam) Vaknin

### Curriculum Vitae

Born in 1961 in Qiryat-Yam, Israel.

Served in the Israeli Defence Force (1979-1982) in training and education units.

#### Education

1970-1978: Completed nine semesters in the Technion - Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa.

1982-3: [Ph.D. in Philosophy](#) (dissertation: "[Time Asymmetry Revisited](#)") - [California Miramar University](#) (formerly: [Pacific Western University](#)), **California**, USA.

1982-5: Graduate of numerous courses in Finance Theory and International Trading in the UK and USA.

Certified [E-Commerce Concepts Analyst](#) by [Brainbench](#).

Certified in [Psychological Counselling Techniques](#) by [Brainbench](#).

[Certified Financial Analyst](#) by [Brainbench](#).

Full proficiency in Hebrew and in English.

#### Business Experience

### ***1979 to 1983***

Commentator in Yedioth Aharonot, Ma'ariv, and Bamakhane.  
Published sci-fi short fiction in Fantasy 2000.

Founder and co-owner of a chain of computerised information kiosks in Tel-Aviv, Israel.

### ***1982 to 1985***

Senior positions with the Nessim D. Gaon Group of Companies in Geneva, Paris and New-York (NOGA and APROFIM SA):

- Chief Analyst of Edible Commodities in the Group's Headquarters in Switzerland
- Manager of the Research and Analysis Division
- Manager of the Data Processing Division
- Project Manager of the Nigerian Computerised Census
- Vice President in charge of RND and Advanced Technologies
- Vice President in charge of Sovereign Debt Financing

### ***1985 to 1986***

Represented Canadian Venture Capital Funds in Israel.

### ***1986 to 1987***

General Manager of IPE Ltd. in London. The firm financed international multi-lateral countertrade and leasing transactions.

### ***1988 to 1990***

Co-founder and Director of "Mikbats-Tesuah", a portfolio management firm based in Tel-Aviv.

Activities included large-scale portfolio management, underwriting, forex trading and general financial advisory services.

### ***1990 to Present***

Freelance consultant to many of Israel's Blue-Chip firms, mainly on issues related to the capital markets in Israel, Canada, the UK and the USA.

Consultant to foreign RND ventures and to Governments on macro-economic matters.

Freelance journalist in various media in the United States.

### ***1990 to 1995***

President of the Israel chapter of the Professors World Peace Academy (PWPA) and (briefly) Israel representative of the "Washington Times".

### ***1993 to 1994***

Co-owner and Director of many business enterprises:

- The Omega and Energy Air-Conditioning Concern
  - AVP Financial Consultants
  - Handiman Legal Services
- Total annual turnover of the group: 10 million USD.

Co-owner, Director and Finance Manager of COSTI Ltd. - Israel's largest computerised information vendor and developer. Raised funds through a series of private placements locally in the USA, Canada and London.

### ***1993 to 1996***

Publisher and Editor of a Capital Markets Newsletter distributed by subscription only to dozens of subscribers countrywide.

Tried and incarcerated for 11 months for his role in an attempted takeover of Israel's Agriculture Bank involving securities fraud.

Managed the Internet and International News Department of an Israeli mass media group, "Ha-Tikshoret and Namer".

Assistant in the Law Faculty in Tel-Aviv University (to Prof. S.G. Shoham).

### ***1996 to 1999***

Financial consultant to leading businesses in Macedonia, Russia and the Czech Republic.

Economic commentator in "[Nova Makedonija](#)", "Dnevnik", "Makedonija Denes", "Izvestia", "Argumenti i Fakti", "The Middle East Times", "The New Presence", "[Central Europe Review](#)", and other periodicals, and in the economic programs on various channels of Macedonian Television.

Chief Lecturer in courses in Macedonia organised by the Agency of Privatization, by the Stock Exchange, and by the Ministry of Trade.

### ***1999 to 2002***

Economic Advisor to the Government of the Republic of Macedonia and to the Ministry of Finance.

### ***2001 to 2003***

Senior Business Correspondent for [United Press International \(UPI\)](#).

### ***2005 -***

Associate Editor and columnist, [Global Politician](#)

Founding Analyst, The Analyst Network

Contributing Writer, American Chronicle

Expert, [Self-growth](#) and [Bizymoms](#) and contributor to [Mental Health Matters](#)

### ***2007-2008***

Columnist and analyst in "Nova Makedonija", "Fokus", and "Kapital" (Macedonian papers and newsweeklies).

### ***2008-2011***



Member of the Steering Committee for the Advancement of Healthcare in the Republic of Macedonia

Advisor to the Minister of Health of Macedonia

Seminars and lectures on economic issues in various forums in Macedonia.

### **2011-**

Editor in Chief of Global Politician and Investment Politics

Columnist in [Dnevnik and Publika](#), [Fokus](#), and [Nova Makedonija](#) (Macedonia)

Columnist in [InfoPlus](#) and [Libertas](#)

Member [CFACT Board of Advisors](#)

Contributor to [Recovering the Self](#)

Columnist in New York Daily Sun

Teaches at [CIAPS \(Center for International and Advanced Professional Studies\)](#)

### **2017-8**

[Visiting Professor of Psychology in Southern Federal University, Rostov-on-Don, Russia](#)

### **Web and Journalistic Activities**

Author of extensive Web sites in:

- Psychology ("[Malignant Self-love: Narcissism Revisited](#)") - an Open Directory Cool Site for 8 years.
- Philosophy ("[Philosophical Musings](#)"),
- Economics and Geopolitics ("[World in Conflict and Transition](#)").

Owner of the [Narcissistic Abuse Study](#) List, the [Toxic Relationships](#) List, and the [Abusive Relationships Newsletter](#) (more than 7,000 members).

Owner of the [Economies in Conflict and Transition Study](#) List and the [Links and Factoid Study](#) List.

Editor of mental health disorders and Central and Eastern Europe categories in various Web directories (Open Directory, Search Europe, [Mentalhelp.net](#)).

Editor of the Personality Disorders, Narcissistic Personality Disorder, the Verbal and Emotional Abuse, and the Spousal (Domestic) Abuse and Violence topics on Suite 101 and contributing author on [Bellaonline](#).

Columnist and commentator in "The New Presence", [United Press International \(UPI\)](#), InternetContent, eBookWeb, [PopMatters](#), [Global Politician](#), Analyst Network, Conservative Voice, American Chronicle Media Group, eBookNet.org, and "[Central Europe Review](#)".

### **Publications and Awards**

"Managing Investment Portfolios in States of Uncertainty", Limon Publishers, Tel-Aviv, 1988

"The Gambling Industry", Limon Publishers, Tel-Aviv, 1990

"[Requesting My Loved One: Short Stories](#)", Miskal-Yedioth Aharonot, Tel-Aviv, 1997

"[The Suffering of Being Kafka](#)" (electronic book of Hebrew and English Short Fiction), Prague, 1998-2004

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Winner of numerous awards, among them [Israel's Council of Culture and Art Prize for Maiden Prose](#) (1997), The Rotary Club Award for Social Studies (1976), and the Bilateral Relations Studies Award of the American Embassy in Israel (1978).

Hundreds of professional articles in all fields of finance and economics, and numerous articles dealing with geopolitical and political economic issues published in both print and Web periodicals in many countries.

[Many appearances in the electronic and print media](#) on subjects in psychology, philosophy, and the sciences, and concerning economic matters.

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