

Erez VOLK

### The Gift

I am walking down a road. The asphalt is warm under my bare feet, pleasantly warm for now but soon it will be scorching. There are no shadows here, no houses, no trees, not a cloud in the sky. Not even fine desert sand. Soon I will be walking on the sides of my feet. Or I could just go back to the car. But I don't feel like putting my sandals back on dusty feet. It really is time for me to get going, though. It's just that something about this road seemed so desolate, so in tune with my state of mind. There's an un-Israeli quality about it. If I had, say, a TV set here, I would watch a sitcom or something and silence these thoughts. But I don't, of course. Not a reality show, though. I'm sick and tired of the irony, the exaggerated awareness, I don't even know what to call it. But a good sitcom would do the job. Just don't let it be an original production, which is code for an American show in Hebrew words. How can they not see that their whole language and imagery are nothing but imitation, imitation of fake American images. Oh, and the commercials. Who in Israel has ever gone out to his yard in the morning only to find that the paper boy had thrown his paper under the sprinklers. And me? Why am I walking out here, like a barefoot idiot. There are no sand dunes here, no bleached bovine skulls, and the sun isn't really that hot, either. I don't even drive an old beat-up car, just a small French one. It's just the feet.

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Back in the car now, I'm rereading what I wrote. Depressing. Not the content, the triteness. If I hadn't decided in advance never to delete or tear out anything from this notebook, I would delete

and tear out this piece of masturbatory self-pity. If anything interesting or special were to happen, I would gladly write about it. If, say, I were to glance at the seat next to mine and see a dwarf there, a really tiny dwarf, covered in a hospital sheet, with an IV drip hanging from the handle above the door and a tube reaching down under the sheets. But even in the dwarf I would have seen his original, his model.

What about something interesting that really happened to me. What's the most interesting thing.

Once, for example, I almost went to a prostitute. I was in another country, young, twenty-something, a lonely, horny virgin at an academic conference where I didn't feel I belonged. I won't write where this was, but it was in one of those places where you're expected to go to prostitutes. Maybe every country is like that when you're young and horny. In the evening, after all the talks were over, I had dinner alone in a pizzeria and didn't know what else to do, so I hailed a cab. "Girls," I said to the driver, "take me to a place where there are girls." At first he didn't understand me, or pretended not to, but in the end he drove me to a place which looked as shady as one imagines those places. I went in through the door and past a bead curtain, as if in a trance, as if I were watching myself in a dream, and on the floor near the entrance there sat a beggar or a junkie or just some guy, and my courage failed me. I didn't even get as far as the bar. I saw a tall, beautiful, dark-haired woman from behind, she was wearing a wine-colored dress, and I saw the man near the entrance who I thought was an opium smoker, and I panicked and went back to the hotel and resorted to the obvious in the blindingly bright bathroom.

There used to be a drive-in movie theater in Tel Aviv. Late on Friday nights they would show pornographic movies; you could see the screen from the university parking lot, up on the nearby

hill. And around midnight you would see many cars there. I'm trying to remember what it was I saw there, but it couldn't really have been as kinky as I seem to remember it. Up on the hill, dozens of cars with solitary men trying hard not to see of each other, and far below a huge screen, and a woman with a deathly pale, snake-like phallus standing proud between her legs.

But in spite of all that, when I sat in my car, just now in the desert, which wasn't even a real desert, and opened the notebook to the first page, I had a sense of concentration, a sort of focus that makes you forget where you are. That was something real, I think.

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Why didn't I write there was someone else with me in that place abroad. Strange. There was another guy who shared a room with me, and we both went out together to look for girls. Later that night, each of us was lying in his bed and waiting for the other to pretend he had fallen asleep so that he could sneak to the bathroom and jack off into the sink, squinting at his mirror image. We never spoke of it; though I'm sure he did the same thing, and if he had asked me, I would have sucked him off.

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I dreamed I was in a tall building belonging to some government agency, like social security, and I went through of a door in the hallway out into a complicated stairwell, with numerous exits and ascents and descents, and I came to the lowest floor which was like the basement in the Dizengoff Center mall in Tel Aviv. And just like in the mall, it wasn't really clear how one got inside that place and how to leave it, and there were doors like movie theater exits that you couldn't enter, and all of a sudden a driveway in the

middle of the parking lot. But no people. And I wasn't really afraid in the dream, but I knew there was one door that I mustn't enter, a door leading to an elevator that stood there in the basement, which you could only take to go down to an even deeper level. And I also knew that if I turned back I would see myself watching me, and my eyes would be silent and express something I didn't want to know.

After all, no really weird thing will ever happen to me, weird in the surreal sense. And in a sense it is quite possible to find beauty and novelty in anything, like when a tourist is struck by beauty, looking at a building that the locals see twenty times every week. It's all a matter of decision; he could just as well look at a building or a tree he himself passes by twenty times every day. But only in a sense. And that's why I'm going to write a short story, a fable, but I shall write it in the body of the text to see how that works out. A woman I once knew had a cat that she loved dearly, and the cat loved her too because cats do love humans, just not more than they love themselves. The woman, actually it was a girl, loved the cat very much, and when a car ran over it, she was sad. I had known her years before because we went to university together, which was unusual; there weren't many female students in our department back then, but this story is about the woman and not about me. She became sad and started to visit Internet chat sites. She didn't find any love there, only horny teenagers and men that it's better to stay away from, and after a while she stopped doing that due to lack of interest, and didn't even get a one-night stand out of it. She met a nice guy somewhere and dated him for a while. He too died, quite a tragic death. She felt as if everything she'd ever loved had left her, and so she got herself a parrot, it being well-known that parrots live very long lives. And when the woman herself died (also a death that some might see as tragic, and there are question marks

hovering above it to this day), when she died, they set her parrot loose in a field by a road somewhere, as if a parrot had anything to do in a field of all places, and the parrot flew away and found love in its new land.

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A thick, dense, stringy wind came in through the open window. Ravit peered drowsily outside. Today was going to be a hot day. Morning silence was in the streets, that silence in which even the noises are soft, like that of the garbage truck passing from house to house in pneumatic sighs. A row of ugly houses. A sky, still uncleared, foretelling the coming haze. With a finger she traced fine lines on her left shoulder blade, musical notes that faded before they ever came into being. "Mother," she thought, still in her dream, "I've become my own mother." Would she now be forced to give birth to her little self so that she may be forced to look up at her motherly self?

Something was climbing up her throat. She knelt on the floor, bent her head down toward the cold tiles and vomited freely, almost indifferently. Afterwards she stayed in that position, holding her hair in an improvised sideways ponytail, staring at the yellowish-orange pool of vomit. "My little one, my sweet one," her lips said soundlessly, "welcome to the world."

A phone rang in the next room. Not her phone, it was Hanan's ringtone. He must have left it here. She followed the sound, found the device and answered it.

"Hello?" her voice broke. The first word of the morning, not mentioning the taste of vomit. "Hello?"

A hollow silence.

"Hanan?"

The caller hung up.

What am I doing anyway, she thought, why am I answering

other people's phones. She put the cell phone back on the side table where she had found it and then she noticed Hanan's coat hanging by the door. It was definitely his coat. She didn't own a coat like this. But why a coat in the middle of summer? He hadn't had a coat with him the night before, definitely not. But wait, was he still here? Then why wasn't he picking up his own phone? She looked around, not understanding. Something about the living room seemed wrong. And a moment later she suddenly realized what it was: it wasn't her living room. She wasn't at home. And she had puked on his bedroom floor. She went back into the bedroom to assess the damage, but there also something wasn't right. The vomit was still there, sure enough, a lumpy frothing pool, but the room wasn't right. The room was *her* bedroom, the one in *her* house. The bed, the sheets, the lamp, the pictures on the wall, the street outside the window, all hers.

She came back out to the living room. Yes, the living room was someone else's. Her awakening mind struggled to decide how to react. She needed to be active. To clean up the vomit, for example, even if the room in which it was festering was hers. Now where did he keep his cleaning things. While she was wandering around in mock search, she came across the body-length mirror by the door and glanced at herself, and this time it took a long while for her to understand what didn't fit. It was because of the pajamas. The loose fabric was hiding the contours of the body, but it was clear that the body wasn't the same one. She didn't have any breasts!

Oh fuck. She rushed to drop her pajama pants and then the panties, even though one look at the panties made it clear what was and what wasn't behind them, but she had to look. Yes, at least that. The genitalia were still hers, feminine. But where were the breasts? She pressed her palms against her chest, as if to make sure it wasn't some optical illusion, but no, the chest was completely flat. Dear God. And what if it was hairy? She didn't

dare to look. She stood in front of the mirror, her pants and underwear limp around her ankles, both hands pressed to her flat, possibly masculine, chest, in an apartment which may or may not have been her own, and no thought managed to float into her stunned mind.

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Two men were walking down the street, shoulder to shoulder. A tall, skinny man and a short, skinny man. The short man was smoking a cigarette, and the tall man was talking. "You're not listening to me, David," he was saying to David. "There's no luck involved

. It's all a matter of probabilities." The short man, that is to say David, didn't respond. He only rolled his eyes a little. The tall man put a hand into his trousers pocket, a car flashed its lights silently, and they came to a stop. "Okay, I'm off," the tall man said. "Give me a call when you've made the money transfer." David nodded.

"Idiot," he muttered as the car drove away.

He looked around him. Lucky for him he didn't get a ticket, the asshole. What was there around here... There. He walked further on and went into a dingy falafel place, that is to say an ordinary one.

"You can't smoke here, man," said the man behind the counter.

"I'll sit over here, by the door."

"What can I get you?"

What he needed they wouldn't have.

"Make me half a pita. Got any root beer?"

"In the fridge."

He went over to the refrigerator and took out a bottle of root beer, looked around for a bottle opener, found one, opened the bottle, took a sip, fished a pickled chili pepper out of a dish and

ate it. A short, fat, orthodox woman came in.

"Oh, I forgot," he turned around. "Do you have any whole-wheat pitas?"

The vendor was standing, half a pita in one hand and a spoonful of hummus in the other. The thick spread froze in the air like beige-colored whipped cream. Stiff peaks. "Never mind, forget it."

"Sorry, man. Besides, I can't really sell you half of a whole-wheat pita, you know?"

"That's okay, really, forget about it."

The vendor handed him his half-pita, and he sat unenthusiastically at a table and took one falafel ball out of the pita. Not that bad, actually. At least it was fresh. But the assholes couldn't put an ashtray on the table, could they.

His phone rang. "Hello?"

"Hello, is this David Sohl?"

"Speaking."

"I ... I got your number from a friend of mine, Shimrit; I don't know if you remember her, but ..."

"I remember Shimrit."

"Oh, great. Listen, is there a time when we could meet? There's something I wanted to talk to you about. You're in Tel Aviv, right?"

He hung up and turned to the falafel vendor. "Did anyone leave anything for me here by any chance?"

The vendor stared at him, as if trying to remember something he wasn't sure he'd ever known.

"I asked about the whole-wheat pita earlier."

The vendor blinked.

"After you'd started making it for me?"

Oh, for crying out loud. Where did they get these people. The vendor finally came to his senses.

"Oh ... yeah ... one second, okay?" He ducked behind the



counter, crouched down as though about to lift some heavy object, removed a small, bicycle-chain-like key from a drawer or a box and handed it to David. "It's ... in the back room."

"Thanks," said David dryly. He went around the counter, opened a rickety door and turned on the light in the back room. "Don't worry, you did fine," he said to the vendor and closed the door behind him.

The vendor waited for some moments. Then he took a cell phone from beside the cash register, slipped an earphone into his right ear and pressed redial. "Moshe?" he said a moment later, "could you pick up some whole-wheat pitas on your way back?"

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You bend down near the left back wheel and take a look. Fifty meters ago you started driving, and something about the wheel didn't sound right. Yep, it's a flat tire, clear as day. Why did you have to be the only one who doesn't drive a company car, damn it. And as you crouch there, trying to gather your strength or wits, a bird comes and perches on your head.

The bird feels light for its size, but who knows. Maybe all birds are like this. They say they have special bones or especially light muscles. They need that in order to be able to fly. But this bird isn't flying anywhere, just sitting there in apparent peace, motionless on top of your head.

The thought of shooing it away is kind of scary. What if it claws you? What do you do in such a situation, anyway? Wasn't there something in one of those self-help books you used to love reading? "Do's and Don'ts when a bird has landed on your head?" There must have been something. There's some seemingly logical action that you're not supposed to do, and some other thing that you are supposed to do; hiss like a snake or throw bread crumbs in the air. Or maybe you should just pretend everything is normal,

and then it will leave? You try to stand back up, and then you think you hear the bird saying, "Don't move."

It doesn't say this in a squawk or anything like that, quite the opposite, the voice is a commanding, rough, manly kind of voice. But actually you're not even sure you heard those words.

"I said don't move!" the voice shouts again, and you realize it wasn't the bird at all but a cop, and he's not talking to you but to someone else. You stick your head cautiously up behind the car to see what's going on. And then a shot is heard, and you see the officer holding a gun that is pointed at you, and the bird falls off your head. So he was talking to you.

You rush to hide back behind the car, and the bird is stretched out on the ground before you. It's still twitching. A big wound has torn open its chest, and its eyes are beads begging you to do something. You lean down and see something peeking out of the bird's beak. The bird relaxes its beak, and the object is now clearly visible. "There's no time," says the bird in your mind's ear. You hurry to take the tiny object and hide it inside your mouth, along the gums, like Houdini. And then your hands are up in the air, and the cop is pushing you against a wall. When you glance down at the bird, you think you see a light flashing from inside its mangled body, and then it's gone. And with the light, everything else disappears too.

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It's been ten days since I last wrote anything. A busy time at work. Okay, that's an excuse; I admit it. It's just that everything I thought about starting seemed so lame. I know I'm breaking my own rules, but that's my most dependable trait. God only knows how many times I committed to do all sorts of things, like cut down on the ..., or keep up the ..., or stop with the ... once and for all. And the more fervently I commit myself, the shorter the

duration of my commitment. To every action there is always an equal and opposite reaction, like the kids say nowadays.

As always, I've been trying to challenge myself. For instance, how do I know I'm living in this time and not in some other? Well, that's obvious; for example, I own a car, and my clothes are made of fabrics that didn't exist in the past and all that. Okay, so maybe not in the past, but what about the future? Not far into the future, not Star Trek future, but still the future, say three or four years from now. How can I know I exist now of all times? Consider the fact that whenever a new year starts, it takes me a month or two to be able to write the new number wherever it is I'm supposed to write it. Maybe my biological clock is out of whack by a couple of months? Maybe I'm suffering from some kind of jet lag, a huge two-month jet lag with no definable symptoms, but still a real jet lag? Actually, there are symptoms. I'm tired most of the time, and sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night unable to go back to sleep. So how can I tell? What experiment, thought or otherwise, could I conduct in order to know whether or not my biological calendar is in sync with the real one?

**This is leading nowhere interesting.** No! I'm not allowed to write such sentences; that's contrary to the agreement. I want to erase it, but that would be even worse. So instead of erasing, I retraced the lines of the unwanted words again and again and got bold lettering instead of deletion. Now that's actually a nice idea; a text in which the words that the writer wants the least are the ones emphasized. But then how would we mark real emphasis? That's a trick question. **There is no real emphasis.** Italics and such like are the refuge of the amateur. And what about second-order emphasis? In my mind, I see a text in which the emphasized parts form a text of their own. But there are three problems with such texts: 1) You can't really create them; 2) The reader can't follow them; 3) They're idiotic.

Oh, I thought I saw my mother on the street the other day. It made me feel guilty because I hardly every think about her since she died. She was looking a little older.

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She was standing in the dim room, her mind struggling and striving to find a fitting reaction to the situation she had fallen into. After all was said and done, she was still a woman, no tumtum and not androgynus, and there was no shortage of flat-chested and flat-bottomed girls in our country, G-d be praised, nor was there a shortage of clinics that offered to enlarge this and reduce that and to straighten and lift and sculpt and trim and so forth. A woman she was, and no one could deny that, and if her breasts happened to be a little flatter today than they had been yesterday, what of it.

It was the apartment that was the problem, when one looked at it rationally. An apartment could not be two at one and the same time, and no two homes could share a place in space. On the one hand, the view from the bedroom said that this apartment in which she was standing was hers, the one on D. Street, and on the other hand, there was no need for her to open the front door in order to realize what instinct had already told her: that the staircase belonged to Hanan's place, which was on B. street, as everyone knew. And if she were to go out of the building into the street and look up at the wall where the window was, would she see half her home? Now there was a risk of contradiction; and nature, as everyone knew, had no tolerance for those.

As she was standing so in deep deliberation, the telephone broke out again in sordid song. She had already reached her hand to grab it, when an unexpected fear welled inside her. What if—she thought suddenly—what if the voice with which she should

answer would not be her own? What if it were to be a man's voice? *His* voice? How could she know that the physical change, the visible change, was the only one her body had undergone? Perhaps together with the flat chest came its contents, and in her bosom there now beat a man's heart? And the larynx? How could she know it was hers and not another's? Her eyes saw only that which was on the surface, and it was perfectly possible that, say, her right ankle, or her earlobe, or appendix weren't her own. When she had answered the phone earlier, she was still unaware of her transformation and so never checked to see if the voice coming from her throat was hers because who checks that.

But one could not go through one's life whispering, and knowledge is always preferable to the lack thereof. And since the phone had stopped its sobbing, she let it lie and went in sure steps to the door and opened it and stood unblinking in the blinding light that streamed in, and closed the door right back, though she knew the knock would surely come. And the knock did come, and she opened the door again, and two figures came in from the other side of the door and went to the corner of the kitchen and sat down at the table and turned on her their patient eyes.

Ravit closed the door and joined them, although she considered it a battle of wills that they should be the ones to speak first, they and not her, and so she just stood in front of them by the narrow table and waited for them to speak.

"We have a problem," said the one and fell silent again.

An inexplicable peace filled Ravit's body, like a warm bath, like a sip of hot spiced wine, and she sank down limply into the kitchen chair. She tried to look at the visitors' faces, but their features seemed to elude her. Or perhaps it was her gaze that refused to focus on the faces. She dropped her eyes down to her hands on the table in front of her, and the words from the speaker's mouth washed over her. After everything was over,

perhaps also while it was happening, she found it hard to remember what was being said. The language was understandable, it was perfectly intelligible Hebrew, and yet there was something strange about the words, something she couldn't put her finger on, and for some reason, they, the words, slipped from her mind. For your benefit, dear reader, we will try to recapture the main points of the conversation as best we can:

"Did you do this? What's going on here? What happened to me? Who are you?"

"A mistake has been made. Quite a rare mistake, you'll be happy to hear. But you must understand that what is done cannot be undone."

"But my breasts! And the apartment!"

"The choice is yours, of course. But we can arrange for you to keep the apartment."

"I don't understand what you're saying. Half of this apartment belongs to Hanan."

"There's no need to worry about Hanan."

"What do you mean? Is he ... does he still exist?"

Silence.

"You mean he's running around somewhere with my tits?"

No voice answered.

"And what do you mean, 'the choice is mine'? What kind of choice do I have here? Why won't you give me my body back?"

"Like we said, what is done cannot be undone. We can make your life easier in some ways, but we realize that a life such as this may prove unbearable, and we are not judging you."

"What?!"

"Life in your new condition may prove..."

"I heard you the first time. What are you insinuating?"

"I was not insinuating anything. Your destiny is in your hands." An old memory rose in her mind. It was from her time in the army, when she had to be on call at the base one Saturday. Some

religious soldiers were trying to ask a Druze soldier to heat some schnitzels for them. They couldn't ask in so many words, of course. Aren't hot schnitzels good? they hinted. An unformed idea formed on her lips.

"I want you to tell me exactly what my options are."

"Like we said, your destiny is in your hands."

Suddenly she was able to look at the figure sitting in front of her, and suddenly she also realized that there was one figure sitting there and not two. Had there ever been two? She couldn't tell.

"You have three options. You can go on living your life in your present condition, with some assistance from us. You can ... withdraw from that life of your own will. And you can also file an appeal. But the procedure is extremely complicated and not worth the effort."

She opened her mouth to speak, but no word came to her lips. Finally she spoke, and when she did, her voice was weak and cracked:

"What about my parents?"

A look was exchanged.

"That decision has not been reached yet."

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And then you will stand for a moment in the dark room and wait for your pupils to expand sufficiently to take in some of the latent light that is in the darkness, and your right hand will feel its way along the wall by the door in search for an electrical switch, and it will find only the rim of a plain iron shelf, and then it will go of its own accord between two shelves and find a switch there and press it, and an excessively bright neon light will buzz into life above your head.

The room will be narrow, almost a closet, but everything will be there: a chair and a desk and, on the desk, a heavy, noisy, old

computer keyboard, but there will be no screen for there will be no need for one and also no room. And there will be a heavy smell in the air, but the smell will not be overbearing, and the air will not be suffocating. The smell will be that of a barn, the smell of sun-stroked grain, dry but living, and on the momentarily lit shelves there will be long rows of opaque, airtight, plastic boxes. You have never been in this room, and the other rooms in which you have been were not too similar to this one, but there was always an electrical switch and a chair and the keyboard and the smell.

You will sit down in front of the keyboard and pick up a single earphone from the desktop and put it in your left ear, for that is its place, and then for a while you will sit idly. And when the words start sounding in your left ear you will type them using both hands.

Sometimes you will not understand the words, sometimes you will understand the words but not the usage, sometimes you will understand everything, and it will sound like poetry, sometimes like

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Eyes open. A blurry picture, sky, buildings. A policeman, as tall as the sky, kneels and peers.

"Are you all right, ma'am?"

"What are you standing there for?" A voice cries, "Get her an ambulance!"

*Her?*

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