

Ofir Touche Gafla

### **Happiness is a Warm Pen**

Let me start by telling you about the happiest moment in my life. When I was six years old, I learned to read and write. One day I took a pencil and wrote the letters T A B L E. And to my amazement, there was a table. Then I wrote the letters C H A I R. And there was a chair. I couldn't believe my luck. After writing some more letters I realized I was the richest being in the whole world. And then I wrote W O R L D, and I became master of it all, for better or worse. If my memory serves me right, that was the day I wrote my first story, and ever since I could frankly describe my life as work in progress.

Writing is much more than a profession or craftsmanship. Writing is a lifestyle. When I'm working on a novel I shed all my anxieties, despite what people may think, take my time and try to enjoy the process as much as possible. When I'm working on a novel, I'm its sole landlord and lodger. I have a home. It brings me calm and solace. No matter what happens throughout the process, I have a roof over my head. However, when the work is complete, and the book is out, I feel impoverished. I am rendered homeless. I can't stand that feeling of roaming the streets, looking for a new address, something to keep me away from the cold and the furious. Once again I am the stupid landlord with his dreams of eviction come true and the vengeful lodger who promises himself next time he won't budge, all folded in the same miserable fellow.

But there's a positive side to it as well. Some writers fear the moment of farewell. I celebrate it. For two or three years I have been carrying around innumerable humps on my back, like some hunchback gone crazy, of characters and fates. I have become shorter, having to pretend I am a single human being while my temporary offspring kept vying for my attention, refusing to believe or understand, if only for a minute, that I have another life they are not allowed to enter. By the time the work is done, I'm fed up with them to the point of oftentimes having seriously contemplated an irresponsible act of deus ex machina such as a mass murder. I don't look back in anger. I simply don't look back. Now I can regain my height again, for I am once again homo erectus, homo sapiens, homo homeless. And as if that's not enough, something else happens, that sends me back to my desk, if my sanity is dear to me. While I was working on my novel, I was leading a double

life- mine and the one involving my wretched humps. I haven't let anyone read a word in the process. I have been cultivating a secret. Meticulously. Sweetly. And then, all of a sudden, the secret is out, screaming its lungs out, and I am paralyzed with shock. I never realize the book is out until someone tells me something about a plotline, a character or a sentence, and the first time I hear it, I don't respond, I just freeze and wonder how on earth the bugger has managed to rummage through my drawers. And then it dawns on me. The nun has changed her skin. Exit nun, enter whore. 'Get thee to a nunnery!', I shout at a fleeting reflection on the street, for who wants to be a homeless whore whose secrets are common knowledge? I need a new secret. Urgency is of the essence. Roof, walls, floor, and a comatose landlord, will just about do the job.

An idea forms in my mind. I have something I want to talk about. My method of discerning whether my wish to write about something is worthy of a whole novel, which makes for an incredibly lengthy conversation, monologue or soliloquy, is the stalker's test. If wherever I go, I am haunted by the subtext rather than the text, I realize I might have some interesting things to say about it, or at least I might come up with an interesting way of saying it. The stalker must have a good reason to follow me around, and instead of alerting the authorities, I actually take him out to dinner and try to find out why he seeks my attention to a degree of persecution. If he doesn't want to piss me off, he'd better be persuasive. Our dialogue is quite erratic, and we usually digress, but we never forget the subject matter, and by the end of our two-week meeting, I have a notebook filled with thoughts, ruminations, contemplations, reflections and what not about the thing that originally captured my mind. The other half of the notebook is dedicated to the potential story. I'm about to embark on a very long journey, therefore I have to have a plan.

Even before writing the first word in the novel, I plan my route. Superficially speaking, a story is the way from point A, namely, the departure spot, to point B, namely, the destination. Bearing in mind the desired destination, I know of certain stops along the way, some major events, turning points, twists or necessary developments, that will surely be encountered. These are my guiding lights. Obviously I'm leaving myself enough room to move freely between those stops, but I'm relieved to know they exist. Most of the time I'm surprised by the nooks and crannies I have discovered along the way, and no matter how far I go, those stops always remind me that my freedom has some kind of framework. The strangest and

most exciting thing happens when I finally arrive at my destination and realize it has changed from B to C. It always happens this way. And that's how I can ascertain the life pulsating in my work. This is the genuine dynamics of evolution. Something has happened, the story has taught me something new, showing me the error of my ways, that is to say, the hubris of the know-it-all writer, initially embarking on a simulacrum of a journey, while the real journey takes place somewhere else. I stand corrected.

But I'm ahead of myself. Long before the work is done, and the wretched humps land in the lap of the gods, I have to face the most frightening element of my work. I believe that every writer's tragedy is the tremendous distance between what he sees in the back of his mind and what the pen affords him. One might say that this is the tragedy of life as well, but the difference lies in domination. Life is half you, half whatever. Art isn't. At times the gap seems unbridgeable, and the frustration threatens to get the better half of one, which leaves him with...well, whatever. Even the great Polish director Krzysztof Kieślowski once said that he was never pleased with any of his works because they bore little resemblance to the vision he had in mind. We can get no satisfaction...

I honestly believe that this is a problem throughout the writing process that is solved by the time the novel is finished. I mean, apart from the slight disdain I feel whenever I hold my new novel for the first time, finding it almost hard to accept that all the blood, sweat and tears of the past two years have disappeared into this square little object, I embrace amnesia wholeheartedly. I usually don't remember how I got there, let alone my carefully thought-through trajectory. I treat the novel as a fait accompli, a fate sealed forever and more.

My transient peace of mind right before I rejoin the legions of homeless prostitutes is derived from a certain technique I have developed over the years to help me cross that endless bridge between the mind and the hand which can easily be described as the territory of fiction. Stephen Fry has put it really nicely in his wonderful novel, *Making History*. He wrote that fiction is the true story of what never happened. So, the question arises: How does one know which is the true and which is the not that true, or just beside the true, of all the other millions roads that are supposed to lead to Rome? How does one pick the best one?

In my view, if the basic story, the skeletal plotline is the structure of the book, the way of telling it is the infrastructure. First, I take the thoroughfare, namely the easiest and most obvious way of telling that story. This is just the first version,

although it feels like the real thing. Then I reach a point when I get bored with it. Anxiety descends. I start again. It's the same idea, but the words are not the same, and the plot is marginally different. A week or two of bliss, and then, once again, it just doesn't feel right. By the time I reach the desired version, I have gathered so much material which I call my secret encyclopedia. A story, just like an object, can be viewed from a multitude of angles, and I am the crane camera looking for the most interesting angle. I call this technique THE BACK DOOR TECHNIQUE. Never telling the story from the obvious angle, and finding some secret door through which I can enter the domain of the narrative and serve it as best as I can. For example, in my second book, *The Cataract in the Mind's Eye*, there is a serial killer who kills aspiring writers who still haven't published a word. Now, the obvious temptation was to write the book from the killer's perspective, but I wasn't that interested in him, and in fact the book does not revolve around him. Furthermore, the book is not a suspense novel. It took me a while to realize that he is nothing but the link between the victims, and that's when the structure began to take some abstract shape. Instead of putting the spotlight on the killer, I put it on the victims, who were my initial focus of interest. And when I understood that the book should be divided into ten chapters, each chapter focusing on a different victim, structure was born. Each victim had a separate notebook, to help give him or her a different writing environment, and each chapter dealt with a different problem that writers may face while in the throes of writing. And thus the biggest problem was solved. Goodbye road, hello home.

And one final word before I part with you. In my talk about work in progress I have mentioned landlords, lodgers, homeless people, nuns, whores, humps, gods, killers, writers, stalkers, crane cameras and perhaps some other contraption has found its way into it. But I haven't mentioned the most important element in writing, which is love. First and foremost, writing is a labor of love, and love of labor at the same time, and we must never let it slip from our minds. Yes, it is one of the hardest jobs around, but I can't imagine anything that beats a good day's work. Joie de vivre becomes joie d'ecrire. I never take for granted the unprecedented bliss of putting letters together into words, and then into sentences, and then into paragraphs, and then into an entire universe. Perhaps I'm still six years old. Perhaps this is my work at happiness in progress.