

## Noa Suzanna MORAG

Excerpt from the novel [User Experience]

### Web Designer

I can already predict how the work with a client will be like after our first conversation. Sometimes I get a good sense of them already by the third sentence. Sometimes by the first word. Usually clients come to me with nothing, but this one arrived with the image of the website already in his mind, which made it more difficult for me to bring it to life. The outline of his project was quite clear and he himself was unusually enthused:

“I want it to be very colorful,” he said when we spoke on the phone. “And with a visual image of a teddy bear, as part of the trademark. Look, I don’t really know how you do this stuff... but I trust you. What I do know, is that I want it to have a feeling of ‘school’ when it isn’t really at school. Do you know what I mean? I say ‘school’ but what I mean in ‘not in school’,” he sounded amused. “All those Scottish kilts are... they already belong to a different generation, and it is not what we’re after.”

His voice was grainy and synthetic on the phone, as if he were speaking through an old megaphone. He described the contents of his inner world to me.

“We can turn it into something that is more like an 'after-school'. And then there’s the website’s name, it has to be at the top, and in the same font as they use for the scout banners. You know these banners they always hang on school fences? Those huge sheets made of some green fabric... you could think that’s all they do there, at their scout branches, Making these banners. Every time I pass by a branch that’s what I see them doing. And you know, I like how they paint the letters. I don’t know why. It just speaks to me. Oh – and icons! Yeah, I want there to be small icons inside the letters.”

“Icons...” I repeated, writing it on a crumpled paper that lay on my desk.

“I know its nonsense, but it’s important to me,” he said. “It’s not nonsense,” I told him.

“You know, small hearts, stars. Something cute, like the things girls draw when they’re bored at school. To make things short, as far as I’m concerned you can take what I’ve just said and continue to play with your own ideas. I assume you’re going to have some ideas.”

For the past few months I took on project after project, and in fact I wanted to rest a little. I could have. I mean, rested. But then this client showed up and I found myself tangled in his project, which I really don’t know why I took. It would be a lie to say that I was motivated by money. All I have been doing for the past few months was work, and money was really the last thing on my mind. And then this guy called and we scheduled a meeting for the next day; noon in Café-Café on Tschernichovsky St. When I entered the place he was already there, sitting on a straw chair in front of one of the tables outside. I sat down in front of him and we quickly began talking about the website. The first signal that I caught of his personality was *joy*. He was charged with some sort of positive vigor that depended on nothing, something that it would be too cheesy to define as simply “joy”; it was more like he radiated waves of vitality. Something you can’t stop, even if it’s just for a minute, to take a look at. I looked at him when he spoke and I imagined that every initiative could soar like this, from scratch.

I realized his ideas were not going to be especially innovative even before we began discussing the product’s aesthetic message. I realized that they were going to replicate the things that already flood the web, but I wasn’t worried about that. I knew, from experience, that the success of that kind of websites does not depend on the novelty of their ideas, but what can really

turn them from simply another pile of content into a quality website, apart from the quality of the content, was user experience. After twenty minutes of conversation it turned out that he was actually quite knowledgeable. I think he even realized himself that he wasn't saying anything new, which made his strategy even more enticing for me. He heard about me from Haggai Riemer, who studied graphic design with me at Bezalel. We stayed in touch only during freshmen year, and even that, only because we had a typography assignment we had to hand in together, so you couldn't say our communication began spontaneously. And I don't know why, but ever since that assignment he has always acted as if he owed me something. Even years after graduation he could have suddenly given my name to clients instead of taking them himself. And it was weird, because we were both interactive designers, which is one of the most common professions in the industry right now, and also because I don't know how swamped with clients he really was, and whether he could have afforded to give away clients. He still does that sometimes; recommend me to clients instead of taking them himself. A few times he even gave my number to people looking for completely different design services than my own: interior design, product design, sound design. I couldn't help them. Anyway, this client was about to put three thousand Shekels into my bank account, a standard sum for a project that size. It was eight pm and I was at home.

Before I sat down to work, I took Ingmar for a walk. I walked on King George St. with him and when I saw an AM:PM<sup>1</sup> I remembered that I was out of bread and that in the morning I found ants in my cereal; I stood in front of the bowl and looked at them, floating in the milk. I looked at it for quite a long time. They moved their feet vigorously until eventually surrendering to the float. Ingmar walked before me quietly and slowly we reached the AM:PM. I wanted to enter with him, but when we arrived at the entrance someone mumbled:

“Dogs no...”

It was the guard at the entrance. He sat there on two plastic chairs, one on top of the other. The fact that he bothered to forbid Ingmar's entrance, combined with the tired look on his face, informed me that he was apparently the stubborn type. It was clear that he truly felt responsible to the security aspects of the work; there were rules and he kept them. For some reason I also thought that he must have had experience with children. Before he managed to say another word, I stretched Ingmar's leash and we went away. In the end we reached the Sweet-at-Heart kiosk on the corner of Ben Zion Boulevard. Surprisingly, they had a large variety of cereals. I grabbed two boxes of Waffle Crisp and asked the cashier for Camel Soft cigarettes. I took out a 100 Shekel bill when the guy reached for the high shelf for the cigarettes. I handed him the bill and he pressed one of the register's buttons. The cash drawer opened and stopped loudly on its hinges. He lifted the metal pin that held the bills in their place and put the bill I gave him below it. When he sorted the change, I looked at the LSD screen behind him: it showed the MT\_me channel, one of MTV's sub-channels. I was surprised to see it still existed. Although it's not really surprising, it's just that it's the first collaboration of MTV and eBay, and this fact solely was enough to keep it broadcasting at least until the end of the year. What separated this channel from the rest of the MTV channels was that a barcode appeared on the screen at the same time as the video clips. You were supposed to scan it using a smartphone from a distance of up to twenty centimeters. Scanning the barcode activated a free app, which allowed you to buy online items which were visually included in the broadcast. In the app you could find the wish-list: the complete list of products, each one with the possibility to see the location of the factory it was made in on a map, which was updated according to the smartphone's built-in GPS. I couldn't understand why they bothered to do the whole thing with the map and the factories. I couldn't think of any circumstances under which anyone would enjoy such information. Besides, viewers could buy the content itself using the app – all sorts of iTunes files, concert tickets, stuff like that. Continuous updates about purchases by viewers around the world appeared at the bottom of the screen during the broadcast. And now they played a video by Die Antwoord. The song was called “I Fink U Freeky”. The guy behind the counter took out a bill of twenty from the register, held it in his hand and put some five Shekels

coin on top of it. I have already extended my hand towards him and the money was about to change hands when he handed me the money, but then he turned to look at what I was watching. The video was shot in black and white; it showed a dark room with exposed walls. The room had only one old armchair. A young girl singing hip hop songs in Afrikaans sat on it. Her eyes were completely black and a few feet away from her, some young boys appeared and disappeared, each suffering from some minor physical disability. They were summoned to the frame using cut-in technique, each giving a breakdance solo. Each solo was supposed to represent one of the natural disasters that befell on earth this past year. The singer grimaced when she repeated the song's lyrics. Some rats scampered around her, climbing on her shoulders, her face, her hair. The cashier and me still stood there with our hands extended and eyes on the screen. The money was supposed to exchange hands; the video had just begun.

A WD506 hard disk, which I got from the client when we met two days earlier, was on my desk. It contained the tool box: 200 giga of video clips, JPEGs and one more folder with secondary visual images that he asked me to plant in different strategic places on the page; a picture of a girl in a white bikini taking a picture of herself with an iPhone in front of a mirror, a picture of strawberry milkshake in a take-away cup, a picture of a furry beige teddy bear. When we met there, at the café, he took out the hard disk from his bag, placed it on the table and looked at me with some kind of amiability that was beyond me, considering the fact that I have still done nothing for him.

"I know what you're thinking right now," he said and laughed, "and you're right. It is indeed a lot of content. But remember, I chose all of it. One-by-one."

Then his phone rang and vibrated loudly on the table; he had a Samsung 5 with a flexible plastic case, covered with gigantic lumps to absorb shocks. I looked at him when he took the phone and typed something. He was balding in a pathetic way. I guessed that I was younger than him by a few years, despite the fact that my hair began to thin too, and I was scared of balding like anyone else. For a long time now, I have been busy with the thought that Israeli men become bald way faster than other men. There was even a time when the fear of balding made me quite obsessive, and I rummaged through every scientific material I could put my hands on. Scientific studies, statistics. I thought it would calm me down if I knew why it happened to everyone around me, but it didn't help. In fact, it worked exactly to the contrary. All this fuss introduced me to the embarrassing concept of "Jewish genetics". The sheer fact that this concept existed, the fact that it was legitimate within the scientific community – it just blew me. But I must say that I understand the scientists. It's quite easy to generalize about Jewish men: they're not particularly athletic, they are short and prone to diseases like cystic fibrosis, dysautonomia, Alpha 1, Antitrypsin, Mucopolysaccharidosis, and Fanconi Anemia C. But this wasn't new. And the studies I have read showed that Jewish men really did set the world record in balding, a fact that made me happy for five seconds maybe, just because it proved that I was right. But what bothered me the most about this issue was the young age in which Jews in Israel have turned bald in recent years. I felt terrified every time I saw a soldier with thinning hair or the depressing campaigns for hair loss products. I was convinced I was witnessing a change. I found dozens of studies about balding at a young age, and such studies are not conducted for nothing; if somebody bothered to study something, it was because that something was happening in reality. Anyway, I've found that, as of today, forty percent of Israeli men between the ages of twenty to twenty-eight have already begun to bald. One of my days surfing the internet I came across an article that offered a causal relation between early balding and the influence of environmental conditions in Israel, for example, solar radiation and the local climate. This conjecture was refuted the moment someone drew attention to the Palestinian population, which lives under the same radiation and climate. Their number of balding men doesn't get even close to those of the Jewish population. I am convinced that in previous generations it wasn't like this, at least according to my memory. I remember that men used to become bald only after turning thirty, that thinning hair was really the identifying feature for a man in the fourth decade of his life. I looked at old pictures: my parents sitting by a round table in some venue with wooden walls, somebody's wedding. Everyone in the photo is about thirty-five. The men turn to each other in conversation; some of them wear thin gold necklaces, everyone still has their hair on their heads. And I get the logic according to which balding depends mostly on genes, but if that is so, it only turns the start of baldness stranger. If it is

genetic, then what brought such a large-scale change between the generations? Stuff like that doesn't happen so quickly, and in such an obvious way. At some point during my nice little research I have found an official discussion forum of geneticists called: HUM MOLGEM. I enrolled as a guest and entered a discussion group that dealt with the study of the gene of baldness. There I wrote my conjecture about the genetic change between generations, and the first reply to my post was posted in less than ten minutes. A Yugoslavian researcher by the name of Wiginich rejected it, arguing that every process of genetic change must spread out for a minimum of 500 years. "We will not be the ones who will witness the change," he wrote, adding that he doesn't understand why people with no such elementary knowledge enter this forum, and that websites such as WikiAnswer exist for clowns like me. He even linked to it, apparently out of a genuine concern that I wouldn't be able to find it by myself. From his response I understood that I have probably hurt his professional dignity, and that he was probably balding himself. A few minutes later, another response was posted, this time from an Israeli researcher. Avishai something. He linked the early balding of young Jewish men who live in Israel in the present to a rise in mental stress experienced by this population. He mentioned a psychological study conducted at the Hebrew University in 2010, examining the influence of army service over this population, as well as the influence of the economic growth in Israel, which urges the middle class into entrepreneurship in a manner which brings a large percent of it to collapse mentally. Twenty minutes later a graduate student from Princeton rejected his conjecture, arguing that the amount of mental stress experienced by humans is a fixed value that changes only qualitatively and in relation to the examined period of time. The fact that someone dared to think that young Jewish men experience more stress than young men in the rest of the world shook him and he asked the rest of the forum members not to refer to mental stress as a new phenomenon.

In my daily life I encounter two common processes of balding. I call them "withdrawal" and "thinning". During withdrawal, the volume of hair remains identical for a few years from the beginning of the process, and at the same time "gulfs" are created. In thinning, on the other hand, the hairline remain the same, while the density of the hair is reduced by a third. In addition to these two there is also the "crown balding", which starts from the top of the head and sprawls to the forehead. And at that time, at the café, my client was in the middle of thinning, and I came into the picture to witness the cruelest part of the process. From a distance you might have thought that he wasn't balding at all, but from a distance of six feet or less it was possible to see his scalp beneath the scarcity of hair he still had on his head. It was a depressing in-between state; this man was on the safe route to losing his hair but was still not completely bald, and could thus enjoy the benefits of his current condition, like a simulation of the lost abundance. On the other hand, he knew very well how he looked only two years ago and how he was going to look a year from now. To put it differently, you could say that he knew what he was losing. But it was clear that despite all that he cared about his looks. I think I even smelled some aftershave, which impressed me greatly considering the fact that I have always found it difficult to nurture things that from the beginning seemed to me to be flawed. The way he treated his looks, then, was in my opinion nothing less than an achievement. And you could also feel that he came from money; I can't really base it on anything specific, but I mean family money. From the depths of the family. Not on some economic base belonging to one previous generation. And it wasn't anything he wore or said that gave it away, just a few gestures and his interpersonal conduct were enough to expose his tacky combination, between a child's generosity and a friendly economic consciousness that only truly rich people have. Only someone who experienced affluence to such a degree can throw money without thinking twice, and at the end of the day also tell you exactly where every Shekel went. I guess he was a practical person after all; the money allowed him to use his time for what was really important to him, like this website, for example. He told me he was 36, and when I asked him whether building websites like this was his main profession, he admitted that he has been actually serving as the CEO of some NGO for a few years. The waitress came to take our order. I looked at him when he spoke with her and wondered what kind of an NGO he was managing, whether it was something I knew. He ordered tea with milk. I can't recall when I last saw someone drinking tea with milk. I ordered too and the waitress left. The client moved the hard disk again to the middle of the table and mentioned to me a number of well-known websites in his field that contained motifs he liked. He said he wanted to draw inspiration from them and "make them his own". He was doubtlessly the kind of person that felt he

just had to produce something original. Then he bent again over his bag, placing his scalp exactly in front of my face; I looked at it and assumed he had the chance to use products like Minoxidil or Roots HR. These products multiplied in the market as a response to the rise in consumption-power of the balding population, which kept growing increasingly and thus correspondingly received the retailers' attention. This commercial concatenation, eventually, was gloomy; the prices of most of the products did not match the salary of most of the population, a fact that proved disproportionate to the frequency of balding among the citizens. The sad fact was that none of these products actually worked.

I had a few basic sketches for the grid before eleven pm. I sat in front of my desk, trying to think how to maximize the website's user experience and make it idyll. I knew from experience that users did not like to press icons, that it tires them and that they prefer an interface that presents all the content in one page which you can scroll down with your mouse. I decided to spread the icons so that when you look at it you see a stable index, in a way that resembles those videos in which petals are seen as they open in fast-motion; large images, three girls in a row. Each such image was a kind of a "cover photo", and clicking on it opened each girl's personal page in a new tab. I wanted the cover photos to be less representative and more like family photos. Gradually the layout started to take shape and to look more like a website. This system of pressing buttons and moving the mouse on the screen reminded me of when I worked with Yanna at Schiffer-Dovrat – an advertising agency on Ha'arba'a Street. Yanna was twenty-one when she joined the creative department. No one really introduced us during her first few days in the department. On her first day at the office the department manager carefully led her through the open-space and stood by the only computer station that was available, the one by me. You could see that it wasn't the first time they've talked to each other; before that, there were her job interview, probably a few emails. Their conversation in the office seemed like an elegant and feeble protraction of a much longer process. An hour later we were already in the large stream of work. We were hired to do the same role and did it for two years until, around the same time, we left to work in other places. The first thing I noticed about Yanna was her diligence. When I looked at her work, I imagined that this was how work ethic looked like. She looked at everything she designed like it was the face of someone who was undecidedly dead and undecidedly alive. And her familiarity with the software, it wasn't something you could just learn in some course; I think she experienced visual elements with a spatial perception that was much deeper than the standard person, and in all honesty, I was a little scared by that. Her spatial intuition aimed less at aesthetics and was the kind of intuition you would have expected from someone who grew up on a merchant ship. At the end I knew very little about her. I knew she didn't drink coffee, that her iPhone never rang during work and that there was no better designer than her in the creative department the whole time I worked there. And still I thought she was average somehow. Boring.

Thinking about Yanna's graphic orientation made me realize that the movement of information on the grid wasn't flowing smoothly as I hoped it would. I looked at the screen for a few minutes without doing anything; I was stuck. I decided to leave it and lit a cigarette. I inhaled and googled myself. The first and second results were websites I designed about two years ago: one was for an importer of Belgian food supplements, the other for a chain of nationwide laser clinics. Surprisingly, the forth result was a YouTube link. I couldn't figure out what could be my relation to a YouTube link, so I pressed it to see what it was. An ad played before the video, the volume peaked at once and the camera dived into a large hallway with marble tiles. A group of infants swarmed into the frame; the kids went wild and smiled with their mouths open in the direction of signs that said: mini café, mini gym, mini supermarket. In the middle of the ad it turned out to be for "mini-mall — the only children's mall in Israel". In the second shot the kids were shown walking through the isles in a toy supermarket and throwing products into tiny supermarket strollers. When it showed them mock-paying the cashier a childish voice-over was heard:

*...and even mini supermarket!*

*Children can choose the products and pay for themselves like adults!*

After the ad the screen turned black and there were a few soundless seconds; it was changing into a different kind of content. Then the actual video began. Instead of watching it, I scrolled down, to the information about it. It seemed that someone in the credit list had the exact same name as mine. I tried to remember whether I did edit a video for someone and forgot about it? But I knew I had never edited anything for anybody. I am bad at editing. I looked at the video playing and felt like I did have some authentic connection to it. After all, it was listed under my name in google, it must say something. I turned around in my chair and stared at the workroom. It was dirty yet tidy. My desk is essentially a glass palate placed on two stands made of nickel. on it I have a new Mac, an old Mac, JBL speakers, an Amanda and a spinning ashtray. I looked outside and tried to think what Yanna would do if she received the kind of instructions I had received, which were indeed standard, but there was still something about them that surpassed the “administrative”. I closed Chrome and decided to spread out, to create a sense of *space*. I added 100 pixels to the spaces between the cover photos and inserted the photos themselves in roll-over; when you point with the mouse at them the picture changes. I picked a photo in which the girls were dressed in the most casual way one could think of, for the first image. For the second image I chose pictures in which the girls were in similar compositions, only naked. I inserted the videos in a slide show, which meant that when you pointed at their icon with the mouse they changed to a short montage made from five pictures, two pictures per second. I took the photos for the montage from the videos themselves and arranged them in a way that, from a thematic point of view, they were like a content-page of the full video. The truth is that I don't really like the whole montage thing. I think it's unoriginal, and also disrupts the experience. But still every website that respects itself today has such an interface, and it would have been stupid to start objecting it now, especially because of its marketing advantage: the montage is like a taste that helps the users decide whether they want to click on a video and watch it to its end or to continue scanning the rest of the material.

Its final effect is to give users the feeling that they can get a review of the whole content in a few short seconds, or even more than that: that they can experience all of the content at once.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Maayan Eitan*