Frozen Years

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1.
Pierre met a guy called Clayton who'd came to Israel that summer for I'm not sure what. Clayton was from Boston, tall, maybe 6'2", and slim, and he thought Pierre, a short, stocky man with wispy hair, almost balding, was the sexiest thing he'd ever met. I remember when Clayton said this. We were in the kitchen in our flat, the flat Pierre and I shared in Tel Aviv, watching Pierre throw together a dressing for the salad he'd just made.

"Just look at that," Clayton said. "Isn't that just the sexiest thing?"
It was a long summer, as summers always are in Israel, stretching from April to October, grabbing up most of the year, peaking in August. We spent our free days on the beach then, or in air-conditioned cafés and cinemas. I was still in the army. Pierre was working in a restaurant. Most of the people we knew in those days where either soldiers or waiters. It was the French films in particular we loved that summer, the Alan Rohmer ones, like *Le Rayon Vert*, in which people met up on their *vacances* and talked and ate and made love. It was *vacances* weather but we were definitely not on *vacances*.

2.
Our two-roomed flat was on the first floor of a rundown building on Sheinkin Street, a typical Tel Aviv building, most of which are three or four storeys high, with large balconies that look out onto the street, or, like ours, onto backyards overgrown with weeds, cluttered with discarded armchairs and coffee tables. We lived on the less fashionable end of Sheinkin Street, the tail end, close to the post office on Yehuda Ha'Levi Street and to some secret military base. Our building had lost its entrance door long before we moved in, and in the lobby, plaster fell from the ceiling in chunks and slid into the blue mailboxes that were nailed in a line to the wall. Those mailboxes were covered in labels and stickers with names of people who'd moved out, flatmates who'd left, new ones who'd taken their place.

The building was so run down there were no *va'ad bayit* fees to pay, though once in a while the solicitor who looked after the building for some client in Argentina sent a young Palestinian guy to wash the stairs and sweep the entrance and collect the rubbish – all those cans and chocolate wrappers passers-by threw onto the patch of dry earth at the front of the building as if it were an open trash-can.

3.
Pierre and I had both been in the war, though we never talked about it. He'd been in the tanks and had gone up to Beirut, but had refused to enter the city. I'd been on a base near the Syrian border where we spent our days patrolling for roadside-bombs or sitting in bunkers staring at mounds of soil on the opposite hill. The Syrians stared back at us. At night, the silence was tense with an overwhelming fear that we'd be attacked and have to retaliate. Pierre and I never spoke of any of this, none of us did, not about the massacre in the refugee camps, nor about the young man we'd captured near our base and tied up and kept on the floor in the office until the interrogators came to pick him up. Our officers lived in a villa on a hill overlooking the valley, a grand house whose owners had moved to Marseilles and who'd given the army permission to occupy his home, or so we were told.

4.

I met Pierre in The Park. In summer, during the day, there was the beach and the cinema; but at night there was The Park. Two or three times a week I'd be there, sometimes going straight from the base, and I'd sit on a bench with my ears pricked for the sound of footsteps on gravel, every sound a potential lover. I remember a great sense of contentment and promise, facing the horizon, the sea stretched out before me. It was that time of evening when people got home from work, the relief at the end of a day, the scorching sun setting, a cool breeze coming off the sea. If it was still light, I'd watch the deck-chair attendant fold and pile up his chairs, then fasten them together with a long metal chain.

It was on a night like this that I met Pierre.

He was being pursued by an older man, much older, so he sat down next to me, pretended we knew each other.

"How's it going?" he said.

"I know that guy," I said. "He's creepy."

"Can we talk about something else?" he said.

We landed up talking about art and music – we both wanted to study acting – but mainly we talked about the guys we'd had sex with, probably as a way of working out what kind of sex we were about to have. We laughed a lot. We were in our early twenties. We hardly said "no" to anything. That was twenty-five years ago. So when Pierre finally said: "Do you want to have sex?" I said: "Sure." And we took a cab back to my flat.

The sex wasn't great. I hardly remember what we did. But the friendship that happened afterwards was uninhibited and effortless. Pierre was living with his parents, so it made sense for him to move in with me. We lived well together for most of that time.

Most of the time, that is, until I did what I did.

5.

Pierre had another man after Clayton. Another man from later that summer. A guy called Turo, a dancer from Colombia, who'd he'd run away from some slum in Bogota and landed up in Tel Aviv working with the Bat Sheva Dance Company. He was tall and slim and dark, some mix of Indian and African. He was the man who stayed the longest, his devotion to Pierre was absolute and gentle, and Pierre would stare at him in wonder, as if he'd fallen, like some Marquesian angel, out of the sky and onto the sofa on our balcony. Turo became part of our household.

6.

This was in 1984. Israel was still at war. Lebanon was our Vietnam. We were the soldiers and the protestors, the veterans and the hippies. I fucked around a lot, met all sorts of people. We all seemed to fuck around a lot. AIDS was happening elsewhere. We had other life-and-death issues hanging over our heads.

7.

I remember one Saturday night sitting with Pierre on the floor in the kitchen – the coolest place in the flat – eating cheese and pickled cucumber sandwiches and drinking Goldstar Beer. Something like Chopin's *Nocturnes* was on the turntable, the first side of the record almost finished, when there was a knock on the door. I got up to open. It was the bus-driver who'd chatted me up on the #5 bus earlier that week on my way home from the Central Bus Station.

"I was out walking the dog," he said, gesturing to his weimaraner.

"Come in," I said.

"Maybe it's not a good time," he said, looking over my shoulder towards the kitchen where Pierre was sticking his head out from the doorway, just a few centimetres off the ground.

"What a gorgeous dog!" Pierre said, waving, his French accent more pronounced than usual.

"I'll be back in a minute," I said to Pierre.

I took the bus-driver up onto the roof. I knew what he wanted; he'd told me already. He was married to an American woman, they'd been together for ten years. There was something desperate and hungry about him, so we went did it under the warm night sky, against the sink where we used to do our laundry on those weekends we couldn't afford the laundrette. I remember his beautiful grey dog standing under the sink catching drops of water on its tongue. I remember thinking that this is the most wonderful thing, to be able to go upstairs with no sense of guilt or worry, no fear at all, have sex with a man, then kiss at the top of the stairs – it's the right thing to do after sex with a stranger, regardless of whether you'll see them again – and then go back down to the kitchen where a good friend waits to pick up where we left off.

8.

I came across Pierre's profile recently on a friends networking site. I thought a lot about why I wanted to send him a message. I wanted to apologise. I wanted somehow to make things better, set things straight, make amends. If I'm honest, I wanted to recapture something of that time, that closeness we had, the ease of our intimacy, the heat of Tel Aviv, those tiled floors under bare feet, the lovers we had, the ones we gossiped about. I wanted all that – the humidity, the drama, everything – because there is a part of me that is afraid to think, afraid to admit that perhaps the last twenty years of living where I live now, in this cold Northern country, have been a mistake, an escape, a way of blanking out the all-pervading sense of injustice, the corruption, the corrosion that bleeds into every aspect of life in Israel. These years away have been years of unreality. Frozen years.

I contacted him because I want to believe we *could* go back to the beginning, back to where things started to go wrong and do it differently this time, be friends again. I thought about responses I might get from Pierre, something surprisingly kind, light and almost joking, as if to say: Ah, we were just kids then (because we were) or maybe I'd get something deservedly harsh and vindictive. I wanted to believe that we'd be able to talk about it and everything would be forgiven. I know it's naïve, but he's my link to that time, the only person I know who can take us back there. So I sent him a message.

"Is that you?" I said, and waited.

9.

On Saturday mornings we used to get up early, put on our uniforms without berets or boots, just sandals or flip-flops, and walk to Derech Haifa – the road leading north out of Tel Aviv – and hitch a ride up the coast. It was easy to get cars to stop if you were in uniform, especially if you looked like a combat soldier in those loose, faded trousers and maroon paratrooper boots, which I managed to get hold of somehow even though by then I'd been moved to a clerical job on a base near the city.

I'd still been in Lebanon the year before that, the year before that summer, the summer I'm remembering, the summer we spent our Saturdays on the beach. During my stint in Lebanon I never saw the sea, though for a few months our unit was based near Lake Karoun and we swam between patrols and guard duty, until snipers began taking pot-shots at us from the hills, and we had to start wearing helmets and bullet-proof jackets at all times.

10.

Now I live in a Northern country far from Tel Aviv. The cold keeps me intact, whole and separate. The cold inhibits movement, makes you want to wrap up. It's different in the heat. Heat joins you to others, to things, to everything. It's impossible to be distinct when you're constantly sweating, melting into the world. That summer, in all the confusion of sweat and heat and lust and listening to Chopin in the dark, I did something that surprised me, surprised me because it was a first, and like having sex for the first time, like being fucked for the first time, or rimmed, or sucked off, whatever, it was something to add to my repertoire of – what? I don't know. Things to do with other people? But from that summer onwards, I'd be able to say: I have betrayed a friend.

I did the unmentionable, the unforgivable. I was, as someone said to me years later and under different circumstances, lacking in human kindness.

11.

Turo, the Columbian dancer, and I almost had sex before we had sex – it happened a few weeks before I met Pierre, before Pierre brought him home from I don't remember where, probably the street, maybe even The Park. Pierre was good at chatting guys up. Or maybe it was Turo who did the chatting up.

I met Turo on the street.

It was late at night, earlier that same summer. I'd been jogging by the beach and was on my way home, turning off Allenby Street and running along Rothschild Boulevard, when a man on a bike cycled up beside me. We carried on like this all the way down the boulevard – him cycling and me running, me occasionally looking at him and the two of us smiling – all the way until I turned onto Sheinkin Street to get back to my flat. About a month later I met Pierre in the Park and brought him home for sex. The man on the bike had been Turo. The next time I'd see him was with Pierre. It's all a blur now. Twenty-five years later and those Sheinkin years are a blur.

12.

What will we talk about if Pierre does write back? About the war? About the parties we went to? About dancing at Divine till five in the morning? About those crazy months of living together – what were we thinking? How did we land up fighting... and over what? Over a man who neither of us ever saw again.

13.

One evening Turo turned up at the flat barefoot, his T-shirt soaked in sweat, saying he'd forgotten where we lived. He'd gotten off the bus outside Ichilov Hospital and walked all the way to our place from Weizman Street.

"I knew it was in the south," he said. "I just couldn't remember what street."

He scratched his stomach as if ants were crawling beneath his skin.

"I kept asking people where you guys lived," he said.

"Let's walk," I said. "Let's go for a walk."

So we did, along Sheinkin Street, onto Rothschild Boulevard where people were walking their dogs, where old couples sat on wooden benches facing inwards, so that all the happenings on the boulevard – the walking of the dogs, the Filipina nannies with their kids, the yeshiva *bochers* on their way to and from *heder* – were like some great drama, actors criss-crossing a stage.

"I have to lie down," Turo said. "I have to. I'm tired."

"Keep walking," I said.

But his feet gave way and he caved in, flopped down onto the gravel in the middle of the boulevard.

"Is he okay?" a woman called from her bench.

"Should I call an ambulance?" the man in the kiosk asked.

I waved at him and smiled and shook my head and tried to get Turo to stand up.

"We should walk back to the flat," I said. "It's not a good place to lie down."

"It's hard to get up," he said.

"You'll be more comfortable at home," I said.

"It's comfortable here," he said. "It's very comfortable."

"Arturo," I said. "What pills did you take?"

"Blue," he said, curling up with his knees close to his chest. "A blue one, I think. Or a red one. What colour is LSD? Isn't it white? Do they all come in colours? Where did Amir get them from? I must warn him. Let's warn him."

"You'll have to get up for that," I said.

"Okay," he said. "Let's go home. Maybe Pierre will be back by now."

"Pierre's with his parents," I said. "He won't be back until next week."

14.

A week later, when I got home in the evening from the base, Pierre was in the kitchen. He was sitting at the small narrow table in that small narrow kitchen holding a glass of water.

"Were you going to tell me?" he said.

"About what?" I said.

"Yes," he said. "About what?" and stood up with his glass in his hand and threw the water into my face.

I moved towards him, punched him on the arm, pushed him so that he fell towards the balcony door. I filled another glass and flung the water at him. We fought. We landed up on the bed in my room – I don't remember how – but we tried to pin each other down. We were sweating and we were wet from the water. And then I spat at him. I didn't think and I didn't stop myself. I just spat. It was a way of expelling him, of expelling my guilt and my disgust with myself. Then he spat back. There was something sexual about our fight. We'd been friends for over two years, two years since we'd fumbled around and called it sex, then joked about it, got a kick out of telling people we'd once thought we could be lovers. And it hit me, or rather, I could no longer avoid the fact, as I pinned Pierre's arms to the bed like in some childish game of Surrender, that he still wanted to have sex, and I wanted to hurt him for that. He was, as my mother would say, a hoverer, and in my mother's world, in the world of my childhood, hovering was the ultimate crime. It meant indecision. It meant having an unspoken desire. It meant cowardice, submission. And worst of all, it meant: I need you.

Like my mother, I do not deal well with being needed.

"How could you do it?" Pierre said. "How?"

"I don't know," I said, because I didn't, because I don't think I knew why I did anything in those days.

15.

When you write the word Pierre in Hebrew, it can be read – if you don't use the dots and dashes that are the vowels – as "fair." As in: *That's not fair*. Israelis use that phrase a lot. *Zeh loh fer*, meaning: That's not fair.

16.

Pierre got off the bed and I stayed there, my eyes closed, too ashamed to do anything. I listened to him open the front door. I assumed he was carrying his stuff downstairs to a taxi or that he'd called a friend to come and take him away. I thought of getting up and apologising. But I didn't. Maybe I didn't feel sorry. Maybe I assumed that Turo wanted me more than he wanted Pierre and that somehow made it all okay.

"It's never too late," a friend said recently when I told her the story. We were talking about things we regretted, which was how I got to thinking about Pierre again, and why I went looking for him on Facebook.

My friend said she wished she'd said "yes" more often when she was younger.

"I hardly ever said no," I said. "In those days."

The last thing I remember of Pierre was the sound of the front-door key as he put it on the chest in the passageway between what was his bedroom and mine. I listened to him walk to the door. I hoped he'd walk the other way, towards the kitchen, that then stop and peer into my bedroom and we'd say something to each other, anything. Then I heard the front door close.

17.

In the days before things went wrong, we went to see a staging of Verdi's *Falstaff*. Turo might have gotten us tickets through the ballet company, or maybe an ex of his was Bardolph; it was something like that. As soon as the opera began, I thought: This is what we look like so much of the time, men together in a room, laughing. We must have looked like that – Pierre, Turo, me, and this young guitarist called Tom whom I'd met at a party – the four of us on the beach one time at five in the morning after dancing all night at Divine on Dizengoff Street. We left our clothes on the sand and swam out towards the wave breakers, quietly through the thick water, sober again, and climbed up onto the rocks to sit there as darkness faded, four mermen, four happy men, deliciously tired, waiting for the sun to come up over the cliffs of The Park and for the pensioners to appear for their morning swim, and for someone to say, which Pierre did, he said: "Time to sleep." And we swam back to shore, dried ourselves off with our T-shirts, got into Tom's car, still naked, and drove home to the flat on Sheinkin Street.

18.

About a week after I wrote to him, Pierre wrote back, an email of three paragraphs of equal size. His message and his tone were angry and unforgiving, there was something mean in his words, as if the fight had never really finished, as if the hurt had not subsided over the years. He didn't mention anything about what had happened between us, didn't respond to the apology in my message. I wondered if, like me, he was still single. I wondered if he felt, like me, like I have felt about one or two men in my life, that Turo was his one chance to be with someone so profoundly beautiful and adoring and that I had taken that away from him, destroyed something. Did he want to keep on fighting? Was the nasty tone of his message meant as a provocation? But I'll never know, because I did not respond. And that's all there is to say about Pierre.

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