

Incident at a Bus Stop

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There is a bus stop east of Netanya where you catch the buses out of Tel Aviv heading north. It's a simple bus stop, a single steel-and-glass shelter by the highway, alongside a small grove of eucalyptus. There often are a lot of soldiers there, teenagers mostly, in green uniforms with shirttails untucked and loose pants hanging down over the tops of combat boots. In the daytime heat, six or so soldiers usually crowd together on the shaded bench inside the shelter. They sit with their guns on the ground, butt end down; their arms are crossed over the muzzles, their heads leaning on their arms. Their eyes are closed; they are napping before the bus takes them back to the Lebanese border.

Danny Epstein was there when the bomb went off. When he was in the Army, he was stationed on the West Bank, near Hebron. It was quiet most of the time; there were peace negotiations, and he never had to fire his gun. Still, it was not a comfortable time for him; as he patrolled he saw nothing but the look of hate on the faces of the Palestinians. He could not understand such hate. There would be a Palestinian state, he was sure, and he welcomed this. Live in peace, he thought, and let us do the same. Yet wherever he turned he saw nothing but hate. It was unmistakable, even in the broad, dark eyes of five-year-olds. He was taught always to be on guard; given a chance anyone might kill him, the commanders said. He did not want to believe this, but seeing the hate in the faces, he decided he had no choice.

The faces followed him to sleep. At night, with his eyes closed, he saw them—children mostly—and it made his sleep uncomfortable and frightening. At first he did not want to tell anyone about his dreams, but over time they got worse and worse. Sometimes he would awake imagining a sharp pain in his back, thinking that one of the children had stabbed him. Sometimes he sat up suddenly in bed, breathing hard and covered in sweat, and he knew it was the flower dream; a small girl offered him flowers but when he smelled them a hidden bomb blew his head off.

He was with his girlfriend, Aviva, at her apartment in Netanya on weekend leave when he decided to tell all this to her. Aviva worked part-time in a jewelry shop, where she sold earrings and pins to tourists. At night she took art classes and painted. She shared the apartment with another girl in the industrial part of town away from the beach; her bedroom was easels, paints, brushes, and wall-hung canvases, with a bed on the floor in a corner. It smelled of paints and solvents; Danny sometimes wondered whether she would die of cancer from the fumes or whether the whole place would just catch on fire someday. They made love on the bed in the corner, and then Danny told her about his dreams.

"It's fucking with your mind," she said. "It" meaning the occupation, Danny knew. "It's fucking with all of our minds."

"Yeah, so that's brilliant," Danny said.

"Well, what do you want from me? I'm no psychiatrist." Aviva stood and headed to the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To the bathroom."

"You don't have any clothes on."

"My roommate's a girl, remember?"

She left without closing the door. Danny heard the toilet flush, and she came back in. "If I wanted a psychiatrist, I'd go to a psychiatrist," Danny said.

"So?"

"So, I don't have money for a psychiatrist. Throw me a cigarette." There were cigarettes and matches on the plain wooden table that held the paints. It would be fire before cancer, he decided. Aviva tossed him the cigarettes and matches and then lay back down in bed. Danny lit a cigarette, inhaled, and blew out a cloud of smoke. She rested her head on his shoulder and stroked the dark, curly hair on his chest.

"I don't know," she said. Her voice was softer now. "No one knows." She motioned for the cigarette. She took a drag, then he took it back and did the same. "I guess the best thing I can think of is to make something useful out of it all."

Danny almost laughed. "Useful?"

Aviva got up again and walked over to her easel. "Look at this." She flipped through some pages. Each page had a sketch of a face on it. She stopped at one of a young face, the eyes dark, the mouth contorted in rage. Danny recognized the expression instantly. "It's a face from Hebron, someone from my dreams."

"Is it?"

Danny got up and looked closer. "It's pretty damn close."

"What do you see?" Aviva asked.

Danny studied the sketch, tilting his head, looking at it from different angles. "I see hate," he said. "I see a face that wants to kill me."

"That's all?"

He looked again and shrugged. "Yeah," he said.

"That's the problem," Aviva said. "I can't get it right. There's more to it than that."

"Than what?"

"Than hate." Aviva was agitated now. She always talked with her hands when she was agitated. As amusing as Danny found this when Aviva was dressed, it seemed even more comical watching her carry on with no clothes on. "It's more than that. It's oppression, poverty, hopelessness. Don't you see it, in the faces?"

Danny hesitated. "I don't know," he said.

Aviva threw her arms skyward, her artist's hands clenched in fists. "You need to look!" she screamed. "You need to open your eyes!" She pointed at the painting. "You know where this came from? From the television, one of the Arab stations. I watch and try to understand. But what can you learn from a face off the TV? You are there with them. Look closer next time and come back here and draw it yourself. You're the one who should be doing paintings like this, not me."

Danny did have a talent for drawing; he and Aviva met in an art class at high school. Until he met Aviva, he mostly painted landscapes. Aviva thought he was wasting his time and talent, and told him so. She painted nothing but people. Before meeting Aviva, Danny had never considered art as a career. He was sure that when he finished the Army, he would do something more constructive with his life, like learn computers or engineering or perhaps go to law school. Aviva changed all that.

He went back to his post outside of Hebron with Aviva's suggestion in mind. Instead of looking blankly at the faces that cursed him, he studied them. Still, as hard as he looked, he saw nothing of the other emotions that Aviva had told him to watch out for; there seemed to be nothing but hate.

When he finished the Army, Danny got a job working in one of the tourist hotels in Netanya and started night classes at the art school. Danny moved in with Aviva, and the roommate moved out. They put the bed in the empty room and made space in the studio for Danny to paint. When Aviva wasn't around, he might work on a landscape or two, but most of the time he worked on faces.

He lost his job when a new wave of bombings hit. There were many bombings in Netanya, and the tourists stopped coming. He tried selling his paintings; no one bought his portraits but the landscapes were selling. It seemed like the more violence there was, the more people wanted to buy his paintings of beautiful sunsets over the Mediterranean or peaceful vistas of the Negev or the Jerusalem Hills. He was making just enough to feed himself and cover the rent; not a lot, but at least it was something.

Aviva, on the other hand, sold next to nothing. As he worked beside her, trying to learn the subtleties of capturing emotion on paper, he reminded her that this was the hard work, that this was what made a true artist. That this was why her paintings did not sell while the easy ones he made of the land and the sea did. Still, she grew more distant—jealous, he was sure, of his ability to sell his silly landscapes.

The morning the bomb went off, Danny was headed north to Haifa, with a portfolio of his best landscapes in Aviva's old leather carrying case. It was awkward to carry, so he had leaned it up against the glass wall of the shelter. Inside the glass was a poster of a woman modeling a sexy, black, Israeli-made swimsuit. The woman had sunken cheeks, blond, spiked hair, and a serious look on her face that reminded him a little of what Aviva looked like when she was painting. She might even be pretty if she would smile a little, Danny thought.

He had a day pack on his back with his cigarettes, some lunch, and a paperback for the ride up north. He would have put the pack on the ground by his feet, but everyone was nervous about loose packs on the ground, especially groups of soldiers.

He was leaning up against the shelter, and a girl caught his eye. She was Ethiopian. Her skin was darker than the green uniform she wore. Her beret was off and tucked beneath an epaulet; her shiny, black hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail. Her gun was slung over her shoulder. She was facing him, talking to two other girl soldiers. He noticed she was beautiful, with long, dark lashes shading her dark eyes, with fine features on her narrow face. She laughed at something one of the other girls said, and her teeth were white and beautiful, but it was more than that; there was a sweetness about her smile that he almost had forgotten could be there. She had a duffel bag at her feet, and she bent over to unzip it and take something out. Her shirt was loose, and her white brassiere barely covered the bottom half of her small breasts. He imagined what it would be like to make love to a girl like that. He would paint her, he decided. He would invite her to the studio and paint her, nude if she would agree to it and if not then with her uniform on, whatever she wanted. If Aviva didn't like it, that would be her problem.

She straightened and glanced at her watch. She wore a silver watch that glistened in the sun and stood out on her dark arm. He looked at her and caught her eye; she looked at him with what seemed embarrassed amusement. Behind her he saw a blue car stopped on the road. It was an old car, like the kind he used to see in the territories. It had not been there a moment before. He saw a man get out from the driver's side and take two steps toward the soldiers. The man was young, Arab, and the expression on his face seemed familiar. It was a warm day, and he was dressed in a heavy jacket, almost a winter coat for all its bulkiness. The Ethiopian girl cocked her head and turned to follow his eyes. That's when Danny yelled. "Bomb!" he yelled. "Bomb!"

Danny pivoted around, took two steps, and launched himself in among the eucalyptus. It went off just as he hit the ground. He landed hard; the ground and the blast knocked the wind out of him. When he woke, his ears were ringing badly and he noticed a dull heaviness on his back. He reached back and touched naked flesh and warm blood. For a moment he shuddered with a nauseating fear but

then realized that he could still feel his legs and that they both moved. Relieved, he rolled over onto his side. The heaviness slid off his back. He sat up. Alongside him was an arm. The skin was dark; there was a silver watch around the mangled wrist. The top of the arm was still attached to part of a shoulder; there was skin from the chest, a nipple hanging loosely, the small breast gone from underneath.

Danny wanted to cry, wanted to vomit, wanted to scream, but he could only sit. His ears were ringing, and his left ear ached. He put his hand up to his ear, and there was blood trickling out. Through the ringing he heard moaning and crying, then sirens from the highway. He tried to stand but was dizzy and sat back down. He started crawling back toward the sound of the sirens; all around him were body parts and shreds of his paintings. Against a eucalyptus tree, he saw a head, facedown. He rolled it toward him, and he knew it instantly. It was the head of the bomber.

He stared hard at it, uncomprehending. You did this, he thought. You crazy fucker did all this.

The sirens stopped, doors were slamming, people were shouting. At first he didn't understand, but then through his one good ear he heard them call out for survivors. Danny almost called to them, then looked at the head once more and remained quiet. He peeled the bloody pack off his back, unzipped it, and stuffed the head inside.

Aviva picked him up at the hospital. Mascara streamed down her white cheeks; this and the horrible way her lips contorted when she cried made him miss even more the Ethiopian girl's sweet face. He told her that his left eardrum was ruptured and he might be deaf for the rest of his life on that side. When she heard that, she cried even harder and kept on crying until they were back in the apartment.

Danny was relieved that no one had asked him about his bag; he didn't know what he would have said had anyone demanded to see what he had inside. Aviva tried to lead him to the bedroom, but he went into the studio instead. "I've got something for you," he said. She looked at him as if he had lost his mind. "Not a sound." She nodded. He made room on the table, opened the pack, and brought the head out.

"Oh, my God—"

"Quiet," Danny whispered angrily. "Not a sound, remember? Get me some newspaper." Aviva spread newspaper on the table, and Danny set the head down. "This is the guy. The murderer."

"The bomber?"

"In person."

"You're crazy."

"I'm starting," Danny said. "And you better, too, before he decomposes."

He thought it would be easier, with the head right there, but he was wrong. No matter what he did, he couldn't capture anything more than hate. Aviva was having trouble too. She tore page after page off her easel, growing more and more frustrated. They worked all through the night but had nothing to show by the time the sun rose.

"Let's sleep," Danny said.

They slept until noon. When they awoke, Aviva turned on the television. All the news was about the bombing; 11 people killed, eight soldiers and three civilians. Twenty-one injured. They showed the faces of the dead on the screen. Danny felt an ache in his stomach when they flashed the picture of the Ethiopian girl; her smile was just as he remembered. The picture was gone before he could catch her name.

The television announcer said that Hamas had claimed responsibility for the killings. They showed a picture of the bomber dressed in a white robe and cradling an AK-47, standing in front of a wall bearing two crossed Arabian swords. He was Youssef Ibrahim, 21, a construction worker from Tulkarm. "Hamas says it has ten more bombers ready at this moment to strike," the announcer said.

Danny and Aviva dressed and returned to the studio. There was a sour smell above the odor of the paints. "Youssef's rotting," Danny said.

Aviva approached the head and looked at it in the daytime light. "It's no different," she sighed.

"He's dead," Danny said. "What did you expect?"

Danny sat down to sketch. The smell was making him sick. He looked at the head again. Aviva was wrong; something was different.

It had changed while they slept. The tight skin around the eyes had loosened, the mouth sagged just a bit at the corners. The dark eyes that had looked so fierce were now glassy and sunken. Beneath this face of hatred, Danny saw fear. Or was it doubt?

Of what? Danny wondered. That the mullahs might be wrong? That blowing himself to atoms might not bring on martyrdom, might not get him to heaven after all? That he might end up nothing more than a head rotting on a table while two of those whom he had chosen as enemies in his Holy War study and sketch his sagging face?

"Enough," Danny said. Aviva nodded her agreement, then sat by her easel and began to cry.

Danny wrapped the head in newspaper and tied it up in three plastic garbage bags to trap the smell. "I know you now," Danny whispered as he tied tight the knot in the last bag. He thought about how, when night came, he would toss the head over the fence into the police headquarters, then disappear. He showered, crawled into bed, and closed his eyes. "I know you now," he said, then fell into the sleep of the dead.

