

# *The Latecomers*

By

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One day near the end of summer 2006, Liora Kerem decided to take action.

The decision was easy, but the act, which was quite alien to her, required a certain amount of planning. True, she didn't make much of an effort. Instead of precise calculations of timing, speed and secrecy, she chose to rely on luck. Nevertheless, the scheme she devised turned out to be surprisingly clever as well as brutally ugly.

If she did perceive any moral dilemma, she chose to ignore it: in any case, she reasoned, moral debates of any kind were invariably tainted by self-righteousness and attended by prejudice and should therefore perhaps be discounted in advance.

The possibility that her judgment, or worse, her very sanity, would be placed in doubt, did not bother her in the least. Not only because in her eyes the act was entirely logical and natural, but mainly because her image, or the way her act would be publicly presented, seemed to her plainly irrelevant. Indeed, if the possibility that she might be labeled mad had ever crossed her mind she would no doubt have found the thought highly amusing. Like an opportunity to put on an extravagant costume.

Sanity is perhaps a flexible matter, allowing room for negotiation, and one could, if one wished, consider morality a purely theoretical issue. But what about the law, yes, the law, which is rigid and sharp as a steel blade?

It seems that the law troubled her least of all, and thus the possible effects of the act on her life made no difference to her whatsoever. Even if she did take into consideration the possibility of being caught and punished, the loss of liberty did not deter her. She accepted with complete equanimity the likelihood that she might have to count the remaining days of her old age under the watchful eyes of guards, wardens, inspectors and their ilk.

And of course, she spent not a single second pondering the crucifixion awaiting her in the media for an entertainment-hungry public.

In short, from the moment she made up her mind, nothing in the world could have stopped her from committing the act. This utterly inconceivable act.

Thirty nine years earlier, on a Saturday morning in Hadassah Hospital, her husband had burst into uncontrollable sobbing which lasted a few minutes. This was the first time Liora had seen him cry, and even though his sudden awakening was a cause of excitement and celebration, she recoiled from him and stepped away from the bed. For eleven weeks he had been in a coma, and now the first words she said to him were: “Why are you crying like that, Micky?” And he answered: “Look how ugly that thing is.”

On the nightstand next to him stood an old jar holding a bunch of flowers whose leaves had begun to wither.

The order of events was more or less as follows:

On the way from the Mughrabi Quarter to Damascus Gate, while busy conquering Jerusalem, her husband was shot in the head. This happened on a Wednesday at the beginning of June. At first they thought he was dead, but after some time, perhaps critical time, someone noticed that his fingers were moving. He was taken to Hadassah, and that afternoon, in the operating room, a 7.62 millimeter bullet was extracted from his brain. The bullet had been fired – according to a superior officer who came to see the patient in the neurological ward – from a sniper’s rifle. It had entered her husband’s head on the left side, and lodged itself half-way to the middle of his forehead.

It was clear to Liora that she had to keep the bullet as a memento. She had no doubt that this was what her husband would have wanted. She tried to polish it with the tips of her fingers, but the shine of the metal only grew increasingly dull. It was as if Micky’s thoughts, into which this bullet had violently broken, had stained it with their colors. At the beginning, when she still found consolation in her status as the wife of a war hero, she insisted on showing the bullet to everyone who came into the room, and then, after she had extorted enough cries of astonishment from his friends and comrades in arms, she put it away in her handbag. In any case it had already exhausted its potential as an extraordinary attraction, and now its place began to be taken by small items of loot brought back by reserve soldiers discharged from duty, or amusing souvenirs they had bought in West Bank towns.

The great victory celebrations raging all around the country reached Liora only as a dull echo. The new, euphoric reality, in the creation of which Micky had ironically played a part, hardly made it into the hospital. For the first two weeks Liora made a strenuous effort to perform her duty as an agent of the outside world and faithfully

transmitted everything that reached her to his deaf ears. But the longer the hospitalization lasted and the temporary stay appeared to be turning into a permanent situation, the less interested Liora became in anything beyond the walls of the room. The newspaper headlines and the visitors' reports from around the newly expansive empire – Sharm el-Sheikh, Gaza, Jericho, Jerusalem, Jenin, the Golan Heights – only made her world narrower. She was the wife of a man in a coma, and in a certain sense she came to share his sleep.

Within three weeks she was completely detached from the new glorious era. Now, instead of reporting the news to Micky, she preferred to sing him lullabies or tell him some slow, aimless, meandering story, the kind you whisper to a child who can't fall asleep. Except that he, her husband, should have woken up long ago.

She would wash his face, shave him, help the nurse roll him over and clean him up, cut his toenails, massage his bony thighs and shoulders. At lunchtime she would go down to the lawn with a tray provided by the nurses, sit in the shade of a chinaberry tree, eat without any appetite, light a cigarette, smoke it halfway and crush it out in a slice of watermelon.

Sometimes she would lie next to Micky on the narrow bed with her legs propped on a chair and her right hand resting on his peacefully breathing body, trying to sleep alongside him, to join him in the depths where he had sunk. Her consciousness hovered between wakefulness and delirium until the shadows climbed up the wall opposite the window, or until his brisk mother and coarse father arrived on their weekly visit, or until a group of friends burst loudly and cheerfully into the room with summer fruits, sweets and bottles of cold 7Up from the Old City.

On Sundays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays, the silver-haired doctor would lean against the windowsill beside her and smoke a cigarette with her. They spoke very little. Once when he accidentally touched her arm and she felt that his fingertips remained on her flesh a few seconds too long, a shiver ran down her back.

But she was the wife of the sleeping man and she could tell herself that she longed for him. For him only. She well remembered the debt they owed each other, and even if they were destined to part one day – in a distant future, no doubt – it would only happen after they had reunited and settled the debt. Their story wasn't over yet, she told herself, and once in a while, when the hospital seemed completely still, at odd moments when the groans of the wounded ceased and the steps of the hurrying nurses in the corridors faded away, she would slip her hand under the blanket, into his dressing gown, and feel his limp penis which was hooked to a catheter.

At the end of July the silver-haired doctor said to her: "You should start making plans for your future." And a social worker sent by the

Defense Ministry, accompanied by a soldier with a paratrooper's insignia pinned to her chest, handed her a questionnaire and some forms and made an appointment for her to be interviewed by a committee after the holidays.

The bandages were removed. The shaved skull had grown curls. The wound had healed, the scar had paled, and the hope that Michael Kerem would ever awake from his slumber was fading.

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And then, one Saturday morning, everything changed.

Her husband – the man she had known so well, who for eleven weeks had been lying in bed like an inanimate object – wasn't there. In his place lay a man who was completely awake and whose face was bathed in tears.

She took the jar away and threw out the flowers. Then she went to the window, opened it wide, lit a cigarette and stuck out her head. If she could have, she would have stuck out her whole body and flown away. Only for a few minutes. But hardly a moment passed before she put out the cigarette, gathered her courage and turned to face him.

Micky was sitting up in bed leaning against the pillow. His wet eyes darted over the room. Only now she noticed that he had pulled the feeding tube out of his throat.

“What is this? Where are we?” he asked in a weak, hoarse voice.

“It's a hospital.”

His eyes kept wandering. “What happened to me?”

“You were badly wounded.”

He lifted his weak hands, looked at them for a long time and then raised his head and with a languid movement lifted the sheet and moved his feet.

“Am I missing anything?”

“No, everything's there. You only lost consciousness for a little while.”

The brief inspection of his body had apparently exhausted him. His head fell back on the pillow. He closed his eyes.

“What's today's date?”

“August twenty-sixth.”

“August? Oh my God....my God....how long, how long...”

“Eleven weeks. Almost three months.”

“Three months...” he murmured.

“Yes. And the world has changed a bit while you were sleeping.”

“Is the war still on?”

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“No, the war ended long ago. A short and unexpected affair.” She was eager to drench him with an icy bucketful of facts about the new era, to confront him with the universe that had been created while he slept.

“Unexpected?” he asked wearily. “How unexpected?”

“We won. We took Sinai and the West Bank and the Golan Heights.”

Micky clenched his lips and shut his eyes tightly. It looked as if he was holding back the tears once again.

She waited. He didn’t burst into tears, but neither did he say anything. He showed no interest. No interest at all. Maybe he hadn’t heard, she thought. Maybe the information hadn’t sunk in.

“We beat them,” she tried again. She puffed up her chest and announced with a pride that was not really hers but didn’t take much effort to activate: “We have a big country now.”

He opened his eyes and remained silent. “This whole thing is very unpleasant for me,” he finally said. Then he added: “I wonder, could you get me a glass of water, if you don’t mind?”

“Sure. From the fridge?”

“Fridge?” He blinked. “What did I say?”

He was very confused, but Liora assumed that the brain, like a foot emerging from the covers on a cold morning, needed to warm up a bit before it was ready to work. She was in fact almost completely ignorant about the medical condition referred to by specialists as a ‘coma,’ and what little she did know derived from mere rumors. None of the men in cloaks adorned with stethoscopes who hovered around her husband had taken the trouble to explain the situation to her or to share their professional experience. And if they did show her any sympathy, or even pity, they hardly thought it their duty to offer instructions. To tell the truth, the possibility that her husband would wake up after eleven weeks had not been taken into account at all, since even an optimistic prognosis should never be founded on wishful thinking.

“Sure, I’ll bring you some water.”

There was a mirror above the sink and as Liora turned the tap on, she glanced at the gaunt man lying in bed at the back of the room far behind her shoulder.

“I’ve missed you,” she said to the reflection in the mirror.

Apparently he didn’t hear. She went over with the plastic cup and sat next to him on the bed.

“I’ve missed you,” she repeated.

For a moment she considered lying down beside him, clinging to him, snuggling under his arm like she used to, freely and without any hesitation, when he was deep in a coma. But now she refrained from doing the obvious. She waited for some sign to appear on his face. If not

an explicit invitation then at least a hint that their intimacy had also woken up from the eleven-week sleep. But in vain. Micky's face remained frozen. After quenching his thirst he put the cup down gingerly on the nightstand. His hand shook with effort.

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This was actually quite predictable: as soon as Michael Kerem came back to life, he remembered to claim the natural rights to which any man waking up was entitled. His clothes, for example.

"But Micky," said Liora cautiously, "don't you think you should be disconnected from all those tubes first?"

"Okay," said Micky. His immediate acquiescence surprised her a little, and already a certain suspicion began to gnaw at her that the man who had woken up here was not exactly the one who had fallen asleep eleven weeks before. Still, strange as it might seem, thought Liora, perhaps it was precisely this long sleep which had caused his debilitation. The mental weakness, the weeping, the confusion. Perhaps not only the depleted muscles (which were massaged twice a day by a physiotherapist) found it difficult to cope with gravity but the mind, too, after such a lengthy stagnation, had difficulty moving around in the space of reality.

"Socks at least?" pleaded the man in the bed in a childish tone.

"Sure," said Liora, "sure, Micky, just socks, no problem, apart from the fact that you've been asleep for eleven weeks and nobody expected you to wake up, so quite logically all your clothes are at home.

In those eleven weeks, when she had dared to envisage the moment of Micky's awakening and the words that would accompany it, it was mainly expressions of love that she had imagined. After all, they were two lovers who had been separated for nearly three months. It shouldn't have been too different from a reunion on a railway platform between a longing woman and her man returning from the front. A sweaty embrace. Him lifting her up into the air. A long kiss. Covetous caresses. Yearning looks. And then everything else. Yes, everything else.

Surely not a ludicrous conversation about socks.

"Could you please give me yours?"

Utter nonsense. Was he joking? It wasn't the kind of humor typical of her husband. As a matter of fact, her Micky, the one who had gone to sleep eleven weeks ago, was not known as much of a joker. Certainly not as someone capable of making fun of himself. And in any case, the idea of Micky wearing the purple-pink socks peeking out of her cork sandals didn't amuse but rather repelled her. Her Micky was a man for khaki. For black and brown. For navy blue. White on holidays.

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She pulled up a chair, sat down next to the bed and looked into his eyes.

“Micky?” she said.

“What?” He shrank back from her and turned his face away, but her eyes pursued him. “What, what?”

“I think you’re still confused, Micky, let’s not talk for the time being. There’s no need to rush things. Another few hours, another day. It doesn’t matter. Let’s wait a while.” She heard the disappointment in her voice and hoped Micky hadn’t noticed.

“How long did you say I’ve been in bed?”

“You were wounded at the beginning of June, right? Now it’s the end of August.”

He raised his left hand, closed it in a fist in front of his eyes, and then held up one finger after another. His lips mumbled: “June, July, August.... June, July, August... June, July, August...”

How much longer could the news of the war hero’s homecoming be withheld? An hour passed, then another. In the meantime Liora kept him to herself. But her hope that the drama would ripen, that in the end he would fall on her with outstretched arms, bathed in tears of joy and trembling with desire, faded. The embrace on the railway platform failed to materialize. And as the morning stretched out and took on the yellow hues of noontime, Liora realized that she was waiting in vain. The emotional scene was never going to be performed here.

The footsteps of the duty nurse came down the corridor and Liora knew that in a minute she would come in, and then nothing would prevent the news from spreading. Before long the room would be swarming with visitors.

“I think the time has come to let everybody know. They’ve been very worried.”

“Worried? Who was worried?”

“Your parents, your brothers, friends, commanding officers... What’s the matter with you, Micky? Do you want a list of everyone who should have come to your funeral?”

“But what did they have to worry about in the first place?” This quip was already more like the old Micky, although his speech still had the same childlike, weepy tone.

She tried to stroke his rumpled hair, to fix his curls, as she had done now and then during the eleven weeks, but he shook off her fingers.

Liora stood up and moved away from the bed. “Well, they thought they might never meet you again.”

“I understand.”

“Great,” she said nastily, “because for a minute I really wasn’t too sure.” And to herself she said: Hell, he was gone for nearly three months



and I didn't even get a postcard from him. The thought amused her, and seeing the smile on her face Micky smiled back. Yet it wasn't the smile she remembered or recognized.

Suddenly she panicked: what had that bullet done to Micky when it passed through his brain?

And then the nurse came in.

5

As it is every Sunday morning, the train was crowded with soldiers. I couldn't find a seat. I leaned against the wall next to the toilets, took the file out of my bag and tried to leaf through it. I had received the material two weeks before, but as usual I had postponed studying it until the very last minute. And then I postponed that last minute again, and again, until it also ran out.

The file danced in front of my eyes with the swaying of the carriage. It was too complicated an exercise in balance and dexterity, and by the time I decided to abandon the attempt, a few pages had already slipped out along with a large photograph which drifted down and landed on the floor. I bent over to pick it up. A stern face looked up at me from the layer of filth among army boots, empty cola cans, and the legs of female soldier squatting on their over-stuffed backpacks.

This was in fact the first time I had paid any real attention to the face which, at the end of 2006, had confronted every consumer of the Israeli media. But in this I was apparently more or less unique. My aversion to news reports – it began after our Tamari was killed – led me to cut myself off from newspapers and television for extended periods of time. This is not a good thing, I know. Maybe even unprofessional. Anyway, until I was assigned to the case, Liora Kerem was no more to me than 'that weird old lady,' a marginal figure who had already begun to blur in public consciousness.

I continued my hasty acquaintance with her on the sticky table in the cafeteria. I had only thirty minutes left to examine the rest of the photographs in the file. They showed a rather attractive bespectacled woman, definitely younger looking than the sixty-four years noted in the file. But the photos were not of particularly high quality.

The woman waiting for me resembled the one in the pictures but was also very different. Her face was soft and the look in her eyes – in contrast to the expression in the photos – was friendly. The somewhat untidy chestnut hair framing her face had been replaced by a very short, boyish haircut. And it was gray. Nearly white.

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She sat tensely on the edge of the chair, her hands gripping the upholstery like those of a pilot about to be ejected from his plane. Somehow this posture accorded very well with the characteristics I had already attributed to her, namely dogmatism, roughness, and uncompromising rigidity. Apparently I was not fully aware of my own prejudice, which is probably why I was so utterly surprised by her amiability.

Her 'good morning,' for instance, was accompanied by a graceful smile. But I was suspicious of that smile. She was a teacher after all. One acquires certain professional mannerisms. Likewise the ritual of wiping her glasses: after removing them, she blew on the lenses, polished them on the edge of her shirt, checked the clearness against the light of the halogen lamp, and then instead of putting them back on she went on playing with them for a while. This too was the mannerism of a veteran teacher. Of course. There is something intimidating about this removal of spectacles, especially if you're a first-grader, say, and your teacher's eyes are suddenly exposed in all their nakedness.

For me this was naturally an opportunity to search her green-gray irises for the glint of madness I was so eager to locate (after all, it isn't every day you get to meet an authentic guerilla fighter), but all I could find was a flicker of restlessness.

In room number 210 the wall opposite the door is covered with wallpaper depicting a Caribbean beach. A coconut palm closes off the left corner, a turquoise sea fills the right end, and between them sprawls a spotless, sandy beach. The people in administration or maintenance or whoever was responsible for furnishing the institution's rooms must have thought there was nothing like a Caribbean scene to calm the mind. I know that in the other rooms used for conversations of this kind the walls are covered, conversely, with chilly landscapes. One has a photograph of a Canadian forest in autumn, another a view from an alpine chalet. Room 210 is the only one that enjoys eternal summer, and ironically enough, if there had been a window in the south-western wall it would have overlooked a small surviving strip of beach between the crowded buildings outside.

Obviously the tropical beach provided us with an amusing topic for the first few minutes of the session (we made a mutual effort to avoid as far as possible the banal utterances that arise in the minds of two strangers, a man and a woman, who find themselves on a desert island in the Pacific ocean), which somewhat relieved the tense atmosphere.

I introduced myself, explained that it was my job to talk to her, and that for the coming months we would meet once a week, on Sunday mornings, for fifty minutes. Her only response was to raise an eyebrow surrounded with wrinkles. Then she unfolded her arms and allowed her

fingers to stroke the edge of the table with a nervous back and forth movement.

In order to neutralize the automatic hostility I assumed she felt towards me (it is well known that the interviewer is always an enemy until proven otherwise), I suggested that she put forward the first question. She thought for a moment and then asked if I was genuinely interested in talking to her or simply performing my professional duty.

I asked her what *she* thought.

In her opinion, she said, I was just doing my job. In any case, she added, she hoped I liked my work. Or at least that I had liked it once.

Well, I'm not complaining. I get paid to ask questions and listen to answers. I guess that's a pretty good job.

That's what I told her.

She agreed. She too, she said, for forty years, had asked questions and listened to answers. "It's a real privilege," she said, "to make a living talking to people. And it doesn't really matter if they're children studying Bialik, or disreputable elderly ladies."

"Still, there is a bit of a difference," I remarked.

"I suppose you're right," she said and raised that eyebrow again.

Had she noticed a certain impatience jiggling my knee?

Translated by Dalya Bilu