

Word count: 5,000

Bedouin Accident

I couldn't avoid it anymore. During the whole autumn season, Udi Nesher and me shared one patrol car, one desk, and one microphone. He'd grab my pilot pen if I forgot to put it back in my breast pocket. His own breast pockets didn't have room for pens, filled out as they were by his lusty stance; when he walked he pushed forward his silver-buttoned pectorals like the Lion King ready to burst out in song.

I hated his guts, as he was always showing off his knowledge of Arab society and culture. Although he'd never confirmed it, he was said to have been a handler of Palestinian informants in the territories. He'd often speak Arabic with our clients, and I'd just stand there like a golem, stretching one calf on the curb, feeling like the little sister whose problems he had come to straighten out. Even more infuriating was that afterwards I had to fill a report by asking him for details. I had asked him many times to cut it out, speak Hebrew. I had even threatened to go to the district officer, Yossi Rachamim, though I knew our boss wouldn't be impressed if I said most Arabic went over my head.

During our lunch break, many a times we got an earful of Udi's "truths." The Bedouin were our main clients as soon as we left our station and patrolled the roads between the moshavim and the townships. So when he said that all Bedouin are terrible drivers, I liked to qualify that to some Bedouin drivers. Even if you said quite a lot of

Bedouin drivers are ghastly drivers, or you said many young Bedouin drivers are completely reckless behind the wheel, then you'd have an accurate statement, by my reckoning. And if he said that 85% of all traffic accidents outside of Beersheva and 60% of accidents inside the city were caused by Bedouin, everyone knew that those "statistics" came straight from the Udi Neshet Rough Idea Association Inc., because no serious research institute would ever compile such tendentious findings. One of his hobby horses was to say that many of those accidents were caused because restorations to the roads couldn't be executed because of Bedouins holding up land expropriations — another thing that was hard to prove. For all the irritation he incited, we kept listening to him anyway, because Udi was easily the best talker among us and he knew a lot, and who has time to talk anyway while you're stuffing yourself with your favorite goodies, right?

"Listen," he said one week after Rosh Hashana, when the full team had returned from holiday and we were in our favorite restaurant, Ahla Ahla, which served staple oriental food in the way we liked: fresh and hygienic. "That accident on Road 31 yesterday was not a real accident."

I was arranging pickled cabbage and tehina inside my pita sandwich. "What do you mean it wasn't a real accident? Three people died, isn't that real enough for you?"

Bassam and Selim, the two Bedouin officers on our team, bent their heads and didn't speak. I didn't blame them if they didn't want to get into it. Bassam had lost his niece recently in a fatal incident and it wasn't easy for him to deal with this stuff. Selim had been in an accident himself, on a family trip up in the Galilee, when a drunk driver suddenly entered his lane.

"Just as I said, it was staged." With his authoritativeness of the commander he presumably once had been, Udi turned his trim body, pricked a kebab cigar on his fork and flashed his smile before he took a bite. His teeth were overly white; he told us once that an expensive dentist had removed all his rotting teeth and fitted him with dinosaur teeth of titanium, all in a single day.

He and the other two officers started speaking volubly in Arabic.

"Hallo, hallo," I said, "speak Hebrew please so everyone can understand you."

They went on for another sentence or two, until I banged the table.

"Have some respect for the lady," Selim said.

They switched to Hebrew: "You remember those two twins that were killed yesterday were Suwaylim. And did you know that members of the Suwaylim clan were partying every night in front of the house of the Hlayyil family in Lakiya, playing loud music from their car radio, and talking and throwing around soda cans, depriving them and their children of their wholesome sleep? Last month they got a court injunction never to set foot in that neighborhood again. Naturally they weren't going to comply; they say it's their ancestral ground."

"So?" I said.

Bassam wanted to explain it to me, but Udi cut him: "Of course they got an offer on another lot, as all Bedouin families did, regardless of whether they have historical claims on it or not, or whether they profess tenure on some other mawat wasteland, but the Suwaylims know very well that they lost their claim once another family has constructed on a lot that they received after the lawful procedure. They're just trying to intimidate them and causing mayhem and making sure no progress is made in the

Bedouin sector. Why do you think so many lots lie unoccupied in Lakiya and other townships? It's because of bullies such as the Suwaylim. And our colleagues at general duties are doing nothing."

The two Arab officers looked at Udi askew. Both of them were Bedouin; yet Udi presumed to understand them better, -- and there was a lot that was complex about their tribal affiliations and customs, believe me -- than they did themselves. Just like me, Bassam and Selim didn't savor political discussions, especially not with a belligerent person like Udi.

"I think most Bedouin would just shoot in the air to get nasty people off their land," said Bassam.

"You mean that's what a level-headed Bedouin would do?" said Udi.

But Bassam didn't fall into his trap. "Shooting is never a normal occurrence," he said.

"Except at weddings," I said.

Bassam, winking at me, said he could bring some friends to shoot birds at my upcoming wedding. We all felt a little tense, so no one smiled.

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Later that day, I was in the car with Udi.

"You want to know why there are accidents?" I asked. "There should be more patrol cars. It's crazy that so many millions have been invested in road restorations, adding this lane and that extra spaghetti conduct, and lining the pockets of friends of government ministers."

"Yeah, yeah, blame Bibi for all your blights, I know what you're going to say." Udi was scrolling through his phone contacts.

"What do you think you're doing," I said, "think you are Sherlock Holmes? Snooping on people's affairs isn't our job. If you're suspecting anything, you ought to tell Yossi right away."

"I'm not stupid," he said. "I have spoken with him."

"What did he say?" I asked.

Udi didn't answer.

I glanced sideways again and saw he was dialing a number that said Abu16.

Apparently he had some system to work out the problem that many Arabs had similar-sounding names. That cheered me up for some reason. Udi is no god, I thought to myself, he isn't able to remember all their names.

He conducted a conversation in Arabic. When he hung up, I told him I was furious that he dared speak Arabic in my patrol car. He said it was also his patrol car. I said it was mine first, since he had joined the force later. Besides, I was driving, wasn't I?

"You know, Udi," I told him, "If you know so much about Bedouin customs, you should know better than to offend your host when he gives you shelter."

Udi thought it was funny that I should apply Bedouin hospitality to a police car.

Despite my anger, I chuckled too. I remarked that Bedouin tents were moving too, or at least they once were, and we laughed even harder.

"I bet this had to do with your little investigation?" I asked, after we got serious again.

"Okay, I understand. So don't do that in our car please. First of all, I'm not sure there

is anything in what you say. Second, it might be dangerous. We are not trained to do this stuff. You may endanger us both. I'm just a common traffic cop and that is what you are now, too. Second, I'm going to get married next month and I don't need trouble, man."

"Well, Salim Hlayyil and Kahdra were going to get married next month, and Mohammad and his wife just had a baby. All the more reason not to let this matter rest."

They were the victims of the accident that last day. That is to say, Kahdra was still in the hospital, fighting for her life. It was terrible to contemplate. We were silent for a while. Well, Udi couldn't hold his tongue for very long; already he was scanning the radio for a news report he could scoff at. But then work cut in. We pulled our car over to the side of the road, and in a matter of minutes we motioned an old van without any stickers on its windshield to stop behind us. Our first virgin of the day, as we called those unregistered vehicles. A draped keffiyeh stuck out of the window, above a toothless, weatherworn face that seemed to have been scrubbed with sandpaper, and that reflected back at us full of worry as we stepped out to meet him.

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"Do you like those cyclamen?" asked my fiancé, Dror.

There was no question that shopping for plants was the ideal escape from work affairs. Not only that, but I felt it was absolutely necessary to keep the realms of work and pleasure from flowing into each other seamlessly.

"I love them!"

They were purple and white and a smaller variety of the cultured cyclamen. Their heads were delicate and elegant like nuns' coifs and reminded me also of the woods around my native Carmiel. I tried to imagine the effect of their kind of sacred modesty in our garden and it pleased me to think of it; maybe, I thought, I was unconsciously invoking my parents' garden as well.

Afterwards we sat on our haunches and planted our new plants. Besides cyclamen, we had bought a pound of daffodil bulbs and two big stalky birds of paradise for eighty shekels together; a pretty good deal, we thought.

I accidentally spilled some clumps of soil on Dror's sneakers, and brushed them off quickly.

"You don't say sorry!" he said, raising his brows like a comic actor.

"What are you wearing your new sneakers for, oaf?"

"Because I asked to wear them in the shop -- you were with me. And then you were panting from excitement to plant our new sprouts. I'm sure I'll see you as eager as that on our wedding night!"

We started throwing clumps at each other until the whole terrace was covered with them, and had a ball. We almost started again when Dror said it was all my fault and I was the one who had to clean up.

When we were done, we rolled back the shade over the length of our garden to let in some sun. At last, the weather was getting cooler. You could say it was autumn now, except that the Negev Desert didn't have an autumn. It was either stiflingly hot or the cooler season surprised you with its freezing nights and a few showers, and the high hills could fetch some snow.

I felt very happy.

"So how was work?" Dror asked.

"It was okay, and how was yours?"

"It was okay too."

It was on the tip of my tongue to reveal to Dror some of my anxiety about that terrible accident with its deadly outcome for those three people. But I considered it would be better not to weigh down Dror as well. He never bothered me with his worries about classroom management (did he have any worries about managing his classrooms?). If I took my problems home with me, then where could I feel safe and happy?

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That evening, we sat with our bowls of soup on the sofa when the 8 o'clock news bulletin opened with the fatal accident at Shoken Junction the other day. The severely injured woman, Kahdra Hlayyil, had succumbed to her wounds. So besides her, the man she was going to be married to was dead, his brother, plus the driver of the car who had run a red light and crashed into theirs.

"They're like those drivers from Ashdod in the joke," said Dror. "On a bad day, when things go awry."

"Which joke is that?"

"The one I told you. About the man from Ashdod that runs red lights but stops in front of a green light because he knows his brother is about to pass. It's that time that he pops round their mother."

"Oh yeah." I never remembered jokes, especially not the best ones.

"You laughed very hard when I told you."

"Liar," I said.

My soup spoon suspended, I viewed the horrific footage, filmed by the camera on top of the traffic light when the offender's car approaches at a confident speed, which would be appropriate on a motorway in Germany, rams a plodding black sedan, and then a quick compilation of emergency service workers reaching out to retrieve the bodies from the twisted wreck. This was followed by an interview with the wife of the second brother who got killed. She didn't say much; it was mostly wailing.

Even after years of watching accidents and speaking to victims and offenders, it did not leave me cold. There were tears inside me that never came to the surface.

"This must be hard for you," murmured Dror. Like me, he left his soup go cold.

"Bloody Bedouin. Killing each other for their sport; and making a mockery of your department. When will they ever learn to drive?"

"We're not sitting still, you know," I said. "We're having another meeting with those guys next week," I pointed to the screen, where the spokesperson of Or Yarok, or Green Light, an association that taught free classes on the subject of road safety, was saying they had been achieving results with certain groups at risk, such as novice drivers.

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We passed a quiet week, in which our team easily attained its target of just three tickets, which wasn't an official quota, as Yossi always stressed because we weren't in this business to make money. The 10 parkers and 5 movers that Udi and I wrote exceeded the number of offenders caught by our two Arab colleagues. I tried to use

these figures to argue with Yossi that I should be partnered with either Bassam or Selim, but he didn't see it that way. It meant I was stuck with Udi, but by the end of that week, when I should have been at my wits' end listening to his gabble, I noticed that he got on my nerves less. Maybe I was getting used to him. To his credit, he didn't hold any more Arabic conversations while he was in the car with me, but nevertheless, whenever I walked back from the loo when we had a stop somewhere, I saw him nabbing his phone. In the car, we listened to Army Radio a lot. News reports about traffic policies and incidents fired both of us up. But whereas I was green about politics, Udi knew so much that he was able to make lots of surprising connections. I wasn't able to make out whether he was left- or rightwing, or just above the law, but of course not like a feckless criminal who thinks himself exempt from answering to any responsibility, but more like a wise judiciary such as the president. He knew everything, from ties between the Palestinian Authority with Russia's Vladimir Putin to what kind of weapons Hezbollah were using and which stealth routes through EU countries they used to obtain them, to the position of Druze in the war in Syria to how the Haredim were blackmailing the education minister, and sometimes, when Udi's heated opinions reminded me a little too much of one of my uncles whose greatest hobby had been to always look for the meta behind reality until at last he died of a heart attack, I deliberately changed the channel, and put on some soothing music. Those moments I would cherish. Cruising through the yellow rolling dunes with camels chewing on sprigs of grass that were few and far in between, and the cars all driving neatly as they would in a developed country, I remembered why I loved this job.

"So how are you getting on with your private investigation?" I asked, just to make conversation and, maybe, to sound nice. "Any progress?"

"You bet. It's been a quiet week, hasn't it?"

"It has. Should I ascribe that to you?"

"Na, of course not. Though little things help, don't they?"

I had no idea what he was chattering on about. But that didn't deter me: "If your theory were true, some people from the Suwaylim family would have been shot or otherwise dealt with. Or there would have been another horrible accident, although if they continue with those, certain people in our force will begin to see a pattern. Instead of that, as you said, it's been quiet."

"It's only been quiet in your ear," he said.

"I can hear your buzzing in it," I said.

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We were sitting in Ahla Ahla, eating our lunch, when our beepers went off. A teenager had overtaken suddenly and pushed another car off the road. On the way we received more details. The driver of the car that had swerved off the curb had some minor injuries, the woman who was sitting next to him was unhurt, and there was a child in back. The teenager hadn't stopped, and it was him we were trying to locate. The youth's name was probably Al-Sayyid; the car was registered in his father's name. He lived in an unrecognized village, Al-Krin.

"I'm not going there," I said at first, stuffing a falafel ball in my mouth. Then I ran after Udi.

He was already sitting behind the wheel. "You just want to let him off?"

At Shoket Junction we drove onwards to Hura, and then took a left between green fields, with beige hills in the background. Whilst the mountain in the distance colored black, the green field gave way to a long stony wadi without vegetation. The road got bumpier. "Damn camels have been grazing everything edible," said Udi. I couldn't see the connection.

I stuffed another falafel ball into my mouth and kept looking.

If that long stretch covered with sharp stones had been depressing, the shoddy settlement that clung to the shade of the hill was even more so. Without hindrance of any perceptible organization, concrete constructions in varying stages of development stood interspersed between black tents and lots of junk heaps. A smoldering fire kept the air thick, smoky and stinky.

"For god's sakes, I said, "let's go from here. This is Bedouin turf. We got no jurisdiction here."

"Nonsense."

The car shuddered over a road section that wasn't hardened, then at the village ingress there was a flattened area marked off with stones that were set upright, vaguely reminiscent of shark's teeth. The car that was involved in the incident was parked on the side; bearing the number plate we were looking for: 1073953.

"Check that. Now for the hard bit. Tell me how to find the Al-Sayyids, pal?" I said.

Udi laughed. "All of them are Al-Sayyid. Do you want Al-Sayyid père residing in the Ben Gurion Street, or rather his son from his second wife in Weizman Street?"

"Got it," I said. "Let's ask at that tent there."

Udi nodded. "Good. The hospitality tent."

The whole front side of the tent was rolled up. It disturbed me that I didn't see a breathing soul in the village, except for a boy who was kicking a ball, worn and dusty, while a couple of goats were shadowing his movements. The boy's head was hanging down; he wasn't looking at us.

Inside the hospitality tent, a figure emerged from the shadows. Albeit not a broadly smiling figure, but he was holding out his hand nevertheless.

"There's been an accident," I told the man who was of middle age and was wearing a white dress over jeans. "That car over there was involved."

Behind him, a little boy shyly crawled forward over the huge reed mat whose geometrical figures spread through the whole breadth of the tent. Then his sister, who had the same dirty face, streaked with snot, and uncombed brown hair with sun-streaks, peeked around her father's hip to stare at us. Udi said hello to the children.

"We want to speak to the driver of that car. Get him for us, please. We need to take him to the station for questioning."

The girl was horsing around with her little brother on her back. Trying to ignore the pull on my emotions, I kept my attention on the father. He made a start as if only then coming awake. He motioned us to sit down and got out a tea set. I wanted to say we didn't have time for that, but Udi had sat down already. Oh well, I thought, it will probably take them time to get the culprit out for us.

The children, by now less shy, were crawling up close to us. I noticed their infected eye slits. Smiling ecstatically, the girl pointed at Udi's silver-colored buttons. The baby boy's face – he sat alone on the floor – was a Chinese mask. Udi and the girl

prattled. I kept up a tedious conversation with the father, about the problem when to operate the generator. Nights would be the natural time for this, but it risked keeping the children awake.

After the cup of tea, which was saturated with sugar but otherwise tasty, I asked again to bring the youth who had driven the car. The man took out a simple mobile phone and called a number. Meanwhile Udi kept talking to the children and soon he and the girl were giggling. I began to be a bit irritated. Minutes later a lad in jeans appeared, crossed his legs and let himself down on the mat.

"No need to sit down," I said. "Did you drive the car that sped through before Shoken junction this afternoon? Did you know you caused an accident? People got hurt because of your careless driving."

"Yes. No," he said. He looked sullen.

"Say you're sorry," urged the man, perhaps his father, although he didn't resemble him too much. The kid had curly hair and a round face.

Before he could open his mouth, I said: "It's not going that way. You're kindly invited to join us to the station where we will make up the report."

"We can't miss him," said his father, looking at me with a pleading look. "You understand. He is the only one in our family who has a job."

"I hope it's not as a driver," I said. I looked round to Udi, who wasn't paying attention at all but still laughing and showing hand movements to the two toddlers. I almost wanted to shout at him to get his nose back on the case. I forced myself to tune him out and keep my gaze on the Bedouin. "Your son should have thought about that

before he accelerated. Do you realize the people in the other car could be dead from your son's irresponsible driving?"

The two toddlers were each pulling at a different finger of Udi's hand. I saw that from the corner of my eye. A dribble flowed from the little girl's happy lips while her baby brother was nodding.

The father was talking. "Sabir is my nephew. Please give him a fine. Take his driver's license. But don't take him. He is a good boy. Maybe he's made a mistake now, but he is a good boy."

"Mr Al-Sayyid, this is a serious offense. Sabir is going with us to record his side of the story."

"No, please Einat. Officer."

I really wanted to leave this tea party now. "I really advise you to do what I told you. If not, I have one of these nice yellow thingies in my car that I could easily slap onto your tire. Then your nephew here won't be able to go to his job either."

The sun was sinking early and cast a lot of false shadows around the rocks. Sabir, sitting in the back, kept up his surly mood. I imagined he had a lot to think about. We rolled into the station.

After we turned over Sabir to the processing officer, we went back in our car and soon were zipping along Road 31, traveling west. I turned to Udi, and my irritation returned. "Why did you let me do the talking?"

"You were doing fine, weren't you? Luckily we didn't get lynched." His tone sounded gruff. I detected some irony, but it might have been imaginary.

I felt flattered despite that. "Was I? Why didn't you try your Arabic on those two ruffians? You discontinued your investigation?"

"What?" He was acting strange, I thought. I stole a sideways glance at him.

"This was a real accident," said Udi.

"No sweat. Of course it was a real accident! Car pushed off the road. Hello!"

"There was no criminal intent in this one," Udi said softly.

"I'm glad to hear it. I'm still waiting for the headlines about ill intent in your other case. You can turn up the radio if you wish." I leaned back, energized and well-pleased. Then I was less pleased as, in the glitter of a spectacular sundown in front of us, a turbaned man led a flock of camels over the road. "Another idiot." I took the megaphone in my hand and yelled in my wedding singer voice. "Keep your camels off the road."

"Speaking of ill intent," I murmured as our patrol car screeched to a halt next to the Bedouin with his single camel.

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The Or Yarok meeting was held in the late afternoon hours in the school in Hura.

Several of the participants, working folk presumably, came late.

"What's your excuse?" I asked a young man who came in half an hour late, smiling excessively.

"Dog ate my trousers," he said.

Laughing from the whole class.

Sivan from Yarok continued his bleak report: Twenty percent of all accidents over the past years resulted in fatalities, and Arabs were 4% more likely to be killed in these grave accidents than Jews. In all of Israel, 30 people were killed per month due to road accidents, which far exceeded victims of terror attacks.

In the form of a question and answer session in which Sivan and I took turns, we analyzed and discussed the figures and instead of giving suggestions, we tried to engage the youths so that they would think of answers and maybe deliver some ideas that we hadn't thought about ourselves. In truth, we were already happy if they attached their safety belts.

Most of our cozy group of offenders were male. Although they had been told to stay off their mobile phones, I could see that fingers crept to that forbidden little screen to kindle it occasionally. Still, I felt they were listening to us. It was why it gave me a sense of pride coming to these gatherings: We hadn't lost these guys. And darn, so it should be, if you saw how much goodwill and subsidies were thrown into the held-up, angry hands of their sector, every sensible person would expect a rose to grow in the desert.

One of the boys, however, seemed entirely out of it. He wasn't just acting not listening, just to give himself some credit in the abiding climate of peer machismo (except for the single woman in the room of course, who was veiled for the occasion; she looked tough and unassailable). No, unlike the others this guy really wasn't listening, but due to his having ears on his head and no headphones plugging them for outwards stimuli, the best he could do was ignore us.

His case, needless to tell, triggered my educational bent, and I asked him, to provoke him a little bit: "So Muhammad, what do you think of the allegation that Bedouin drivers are murderers on the rampage?"

"It's true," he said.

My mouth fell slightly open. A teenage answer, I thought. Short, and unsweet. "Be more specific?"

"Too many of the people who have caused the lethal accidents are real and actual murderers. They set out to kill. That is what I mean, Miss."

"That is police officer to you. And sit straight when you talk to a person."

The youth tilted his slump.

"That's an awesome statement for you to pronounce, Muhammad. It would be nice if you could back this up. Should we ask you more questions about it?"

"I don't care." Suddenly he sat up perfectly straight and spoke in an excited way that jumbled his grammar. "My uncle Salim, he one fat murderer. And all because of one crazy row ten years ago. Bedouin motherfuckers and my uncle Salim the shining camel dung of them all."

There were lots of voices. First they were laughing, then the tone went up and sounded surprised, then it dipped into mockery, finally it got to be more like a debate: assenting, dissenting. Of course most of it went on in Arabic. Sivan and I exchanged a glance.

"Speak to me after the meeting," I said to Muhammed, softly.

He shrugged his shoulders and sank back into his slump, like a rock that was no longer alive.

After the meeting, when I sat opposite him, this is what he told me:

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