

Word Count: 4,900

## **Fight or Flight**

Before they'd even gone on their first date, Yaniv had a flight of fancy that he'd take her to Mount Hermon to sled, ski or just frolic in the snow. Adina was the type of independent woman with a car who was perfectly capable of taking herself to the Hermon, even for those three or four hours of driving it would take to get there, but of course it was a nice thought to do that together with a date. It could even be like a test: if you had fun during those long hours in cramped quarters, perhaps (no! sure as hell!) surviving a major traffic jam leading up the slopes, then you could go climb mountains together, couldn't you?

That week, fresh snow had just begun to drift out of dramatic clouds, though not in Tel Aviv, where they released a few shock-and-awe showers. In Jerusalem, hilltops and roofs of houses were dusted over, but the brunt of it fell up north around the farthest tips of the Golan Heights. Yaniv probably doesn't mean to drive me there,

thought Adina, but the idea kind of endears me to him. All you need to do is to understand the codes and you'll be immune to disappointment. As a certain famous Jewish philosopher said: It was the thought that counted.

Although Adina wasn't much of a worrier generally, Yaniv upset her tranquility right from the beginning; on two main subjects: One, she didn't like his Star of David pendant round his bull's neck. It seemed to mean he was religious. Adina might have an old-fashioned name herself (it meant gentle), which had gone out of use, and several quirky habits, but she prided herself on being anti-religion and whenever she caught herself thinking irrationally she would berate herself. She would love to have been without prejudice too, but one had to stay realistic. The second issue was that Yaniv was from Moroccan descent. Even though it was probably nonsense, oriental men had a bad reputation: they promised you the moon, but you would never fly there. It was said they wooed you as if you were a princess but you'd end up as a reverse Cinderella: sweeping the floor and serving cups of coffee. They offered to keep you warm and at the end of the month handed you the electricity bill. Of course this was a prime example of irrational thinking, which Adina was ashamed of -- something so politically incorrect that you could never bring it up in conversation. Still it was there contaminating her infatuation process.

Yaniv explained he was going to take his two kids to the Hermon on Friday, and would she be interested in joining them? Adina thought Yaniv was taking this quite far but she didn't have to look far for an answer. "I'm working this Friday," she said.

"Oh, you are? Do you normally work on Fridays?" he inquired.

"I don't but I have to prepare a court injunction for Sunday; it will take me all day. It's for a friend's father," she said. "I normally don't take such cases but otherwise he's going to lose his job at 62, which isn't nice."

"Yikes," he said. "Well, good luck. If anything changes, let me know."

They didn't meet that weekend. Yaniv went to the Golan, and Adina stayed home, with her kids. On Friday they spent a rainy evening at her parents' and on Saturday it was dry again and they went orange picking with a friend who, like her, was divorced, and who brought her own kid. They had a ball playing hide and seek among the trees and picnicking on a rug, in the hazy midwinter sun. Back in their flat, Adina and her kids used their resourcefulness to stock the oranges: they put them on shelves next to toys, on books, behind vases, on ledges in the bathroom, and on the kitchen table they assembled a changeable mosaic of oranges. Fresh produce shouldn't be kept in the refrigerator, Adina read on the internet, so that became the only place that was orange-free. The musty spice of oranges could be smelled everywhere in the flat. Picking oranges bore some similarities to birthing children, she thought: once you got home, holding that wholesome wealth in your arms that you wanted to sink your nose in all the time, you forgot about the backbreaking work, until you realized you had no idea what to do with your new treasure. But anyway, that was Adina's little twist she had got left from her divorce: her twins' constant presence often overwhelmed her. Even when she was at the office she wasn't free from them; they kept pressing on her consciousness, making her feel that they wanted and needed more from her than she could give.

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A few days later Yaniv invited her to go out for dinner. She'd have preferred to do this on a Tuesday, the national evening of divorcees, but naturally he had his kids coming over then. So they settled on the Wednesday night -- she asked her parents to babysit, and the kids were bribed with the promise of a fun Thursday night.

Yaniv stepped out of his ostentatious gold-colored jeep to greet her in the parking lot, which she found gratifying; it was more than the dating protocol prescribed. She kissed his lips lightly and was glad he didn't hold the door open for her: that would really have created an unsustainable precedent. They went to Turquoise, a fancy restaurant in the Sun & Sea complex where the rich and privileged had their condos looking out over the beach and the immer-beguiling Mediterranean.

She chose an eggplant starter followed by a tuna shoarma. "You don't want red tuna steak?" he asked. "It's the best thing on the menu." Adina hesitated. It might be the best, but it was also the most expensive dish, and this being their first date, chances were that Yaniv would want to take care of the bill, and she didn't want to appear greedy, or worse, alarm him in case he'd be hard put to support her expensive tastes. After some negotiation back and forth, they took one dish of crab burgers and the other one of red tuna, and they'd share the two portions. Their choices turned out delicious, and although they didn't talk much, Adina was well satisfied with how the evening went. The only thing that was a bit odd was that Yaniv left a bottom of wine in his glass; when asked he said the devil was in the dregs.

Afterwards they took a stroll on the beach but weren't able to keep it up long due to a stiff wind whipping their ears; Adina went hoarse from shouting. A kind kiss closed off the evening and surprised Adina because his lips were plump and soft. Yaniv said it had been a long day, and Adina added that she had to get up early. The truth was

she didn't, because her kids were with her parents who would drop them off at school. The point was of course to not give in to the need for sex that evening, but to find a natural excuse for putting it off. Adina was pleased Yaniv seemed of the same mind. She considered that much of the virtue of good sex lies in waiting: even with no one being able to tell you how much you should wait exactly, or how much of the wait was pointless filling. With the right timing, she knew, the sex after the wait could already cause its own orgasmic high, and that was advantageous as first-time lovemaking was often enough only so-so.

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Adina got ready for the big event. In the morning she went to a weightlifting class, because it made her muscles go stiff and firm, and Yaniv would hopefully not notice her slack belly from childbirth. For good measure, she also did the core class, which took only half an hour. More exhausted than she wanted to admit, she showered a long time, after which she put on the underwear she had carefully selected: elegant and clean, but not luxurious. Since she was so afraid that Yaniv would follow up his first grandiose dates with something more humdrum, she didn't want to set him a high example that she would struggle to adhere to. She chose her hair and makeup and the rest of her clothes according to the same principle. While she was waiting for Yaniv to pick her up, perhaps also edged on by her grumbling stomach, her thoughts took a bad turn. The more she imagined herself being embarrassed by something odd that Yaniv would do, perhaps some more of that hocus pocus about devils in the dregs, or it could also be something she said or did that he would fail to understand, the more her affection for him got eroded.

Each ticking minute, her thoughts took on more violent aspects. At first she envisioned the evening lying in front of them like a docile beast, but it would soon be woken to get as crazy as its true heart commanded. The idea of sex bothered her, though. However much she tried, despite hesitating about projecting to herself all the graphic details, the less logical it seemed that she would share Yaniv's bed. Yet at the same time she held some hopes that the uneasiness she felt might prevent it from becoming a routine job; that somehow the excess adrenaline would work to make it fantastic.

When Yaniv messaged her that he was setting out in her direction, Adina had so far regressed that she hated the guy. Although he eventually arrived more or less on time, she blamed him for being late, or rather for making her wait. Normally she liked being fashionably late; it gave her time to go the bathroom again, check that her side parting didn't disappear in a funny comb over, and put on her coat, all at her leisure.

While driving to his godforsaken moshav, where he lived in a private house with a yard and a dog, Adina found things to find fault with. His ridiculous jeep she'd already seen, of course. Even with two kids and a dog to fill up the back it was too much. When he tried to tell her something about his kids, she crankily held her tongue and didn't volunteer any information about her own kids. Giving up on that subject, he asked her what kind of music she liked. His car stereo was riffing Brazilian samba but she said she preferred pop or classical. Immediately he switched to George Michael. She took it as a sign of weakness that he wanted to adapt himself to her tastes, whereas if she thought about it rationally it seemed to point more to it that he was a nice guy. At the gate, the dog greeted them. It was a well-made white duster with blue eyes; a poor choice in the Israeli climate, Adina thought.

Richard Clayderman cheesiness sounded from a laptop; the tones switched on automatically (actually, she wasn't quite sure of that). She hung around in the kitchen, although Yaniv told her she really didn't need to, while he got out the food he'd prepared in advance. Like TV cooks do, he stored plastic bags inside the fridge with rationed and cut vegetables and he needed to warm only the bags that contained rice and cooked food. The table was already set. She sat down on the sofa and put her legs under the coffee table. After she had studied the book next to a TV guide on the table, she stared at the dining table where a kerchief embroidered with grapes and vines presumably covered the bread. She wondered when Yaniv would start the Moroccan hocus pocus.

"Is that challah under that cloth?" she asked, when he came in.

"No," he said. They sat down. He flicked the kerchief away to reveal mini baguettes.

"I eat only whole grain."

"Me too," Adina said, reassured. "I hate challah."

"Personally, I can't think of anything more disgusting than bread with egg taste," said Yaniv.

"And it's sweetened," laughed Adina. "Can you imagine?"

They easily rolled into the subject of sugar and salt, the two top killers in our diet.

Yaniv added that he avoided them also for the sake of his kids. He didn't want them to go puffing over the schoolyard in the shape of snowmen. Adina agreed. There were plenty of those to go around these days, she said. She didn't want to develop the subject of his kids, and tasted the food.

Now that Adina knew that Yaniv cut back on salt or sugar, she appreciated his menu choice, of baked eggplant with tehini, green salad and delicious couscous salad, followed by roast chicken and kugel. She didn't care for kugel which to her tasted as bland as spaghetti but because Yaniv was so obviously proud of it, she praised it in a non-committal way, which was meant to signal she didn't want to see the wretched thing on the table again.

During the dinner they put feelers out for the next day. Adina was still unsure about the shape and form of the weekend, but for Yaniv it was clear as a streak of fate. He was negotiating as if they'd be together for the entire weekend, whereas for her the coming hours presented a mountain of hurdles. Speaking of mountains, Yaniv still wanted to go to the Hermon. The last weekend he and his kids hadn't got there after all. The authorities had closed the site because a blizzard was expected. Instead, they spent the night at his sister's, who lived near Tiberias, and the next day they had visited the Baniyas River, which gushed wildly with melting water, and Tel Dan, the Biblical city. Adina loved all these places too, but seeing as the drive was so long she wasn't particularly keen on going all that way with Yaniv -- she told herself it was because she didn't know him that well. She considered it would perhaps be worthwhile taking the children to the Hermon, after they'd known each other better, but she didn't say that to Yaniv. Understanding her reluctance, Yaniv floated the idea of going to Apollonia, the Crusader ruin on the beach in Herzeliya. Adina agreed, even though she'd been there countless times: it would be short and pleasant.

Taking their glasses of wine with them, they left the dinner table for the sofa, where a standing lamp gave off a flattering sheen. Adina would have loved coffee or tea, but Yaniv was kissing her before she got a word in. His passion startled her. While his mouth and hands were roving over her body, she stroked his thick crop and marveled



at his closed eyes in his determined face. He sighed, then panted in her neck. Good god, she thought, he is famished. He must have been without a partner for a considerable time. The other possibility, that he would always be like this, made her shudder. Under his caresses, her body made a turn that her mind wasn't quick enough to catch. Her inner fear was shedding, being peeled off like the rind of an orange. Though it went through her head that if Yaniv made love like this, he couldn't be a bad man; he couldn't be one of those tricksters who only promise and never make good on it, could he? Through her lashes she saw their striving bodies in the soothing radiance of the lamplight. Just as sudden she was shaken out of her near-ecstasy when Yaniv flicked off the light. "Let's go upstairs," he mumbled close to her ear. He swept her up in his arms, not without some light jerking but still. While he carried her, every step up seemed to add another kilogram to her weight, which increased her awkwardness. Surely this would be the first and last time he carried her upstairs? Even more embarrassingly, it occurred to her, again, how she would have loved a cup of coffee.

On the landing, Adina caught a glimpse of a pair of tiny Moroccan wooden slippers, with upturned points, painted turquoise. Must be to do with the hocus pocus, she smiled to herself. Yaniv swooped her through one of the open doors. In the window, a half moon shone through the top of a mulberry tree. She could make out a large bed that was made up. The silence was complete. Yaniv gently put her down and, shivering on her bare feet, she waited while he lit an electric heater, that radiated orange. Soon, whispering as if to himself about her beautiful body, he was stroking her again. He was as ardent as before, but already the experience felt less keen; despite her body moving with his and opening up to new experiences -- which weren't all that new, of course. Her ears were trying to get used to his odd whispered

compliments that were like a cheerleading chorus accompanying his feverish hands and breath. His seeming intoxication amused her. But all the while her fear wouldn't leave her that rapture would soon be twisted into disgust. While pieces of her clothing were stripped off one by one, it felt more like white magic than a contract between two lovers who want to make each other feel good.

Slowly she was waking up to love when she crawled under the chilly sheet and courteously lifted a tent for his head. She thought she should take the initiative as well, but as soon as she was warm enough she got really lazy. Yaniv on the contrary didn't quiet down. Impressed by Yaniv's torrent of energy, Adina believed it to be partly spiritual although probably for the most part it was engendered by his prodigious physical needs. But her admiration, however much she tried to force it into the shape and confines of love, did not convert to what she knew was real feeling. They fell asleep each on their own side of the bed.

The next morning the radiator was still glowing orange and dew beaded on the window. Adina had not slept well due to Yaniv's snoring. Several times during the night she had tapped him on the shoulder and inched away from him. Now, her curiosity wakened to know what was going on with him, she felt with her legs for his hairy ones. It took a long time before he stirred. In her lightest voice she said hello and while he was blinking she repeated "good morning." "Good morning," he said, still deranged with sleep, until finally a smile broke through. Seeing his cheeks all red and innocent calmed her. So today they would go to the Crusader castle, she thought to herself as she folded her arm around his breast. At least with such a modest assignment there would be no room for overreaching promises which he might not be able to keep.

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Gusts of wind swept over them. Yaniv and Adina were looking at the round pile of stone-hewn ballista balls, an earlier version of cannonballs, fired by Sultan Baibars during forty grueling days of siege. As they walked along the bulwarks, they found several of those piles, behind battered walls.

"Do you suppose those Crusader templars were sorry they came here at all?"

Yaniv's phone rang. He turned his back to answer it. Not much was audible of his conversation. "Sure, yes, in the evening, okay?" "My aunt is in the hospital," he said.

Adina made a sad face. "I'm sorry," she said.

"It's been her second home for several years."

"Anyway, I think those knights were happy for the short time they were here. They must have been. Look at the view they woke up to. Today, people pay millions just to have their private place on the beach. But the Crusaders had a stronghold! I suspect that even when they came under fire that must have perked them up."

"You're not very romantic," said Yaniv. He turned his gaze towards the sea, which was roaring around secret maelstroms and of the fiercest blue, without ships.

Scrunching her face, Adina hid her irritation. "Does that mean I can't find love? I was only using my imagination."

"Happiness can't be translated into monetary value. I'm not sure the Crusaders came here to find happiness."

"They could have found happiness without having looked for it. You just said something about sorrow. I could say you're measuring everything by your sorrow."

"I like that," said Yaniv, and smiled. "I do measure things by my sorrow."

Suddenly Adina felt like crying. She opened her handbag and pried out a tissue and blew her nose vehemently, then stuffed the wet ball in the pocket of her puffer jacket.

"Are you okay?" he asked, in a tone that one uses for a colleague. He took her hand and turned her towards the land view. "You should think of the Mamluks too. When they continued to live here, it was with the trauma of destruction in their minds."

"I don't think they bothered to stay," said Adina. "They went on their way to wreak more wars and drive out the Crusaders. Though I don't know enough about them, sorry."

"I've been thinking, love..."

"What?" Adina broke him off, dazed. He used the word in such a cheap way, she thought, like a bus driver.

"Hallowed inspiration drove them on, I suppose, and if not, their commander gave them something to smoke, or a little pep talk."

"Is that what they did to you during your army service?"

"I was a tankist," said Yaniv. "In Lebanon. Don't think I enjoyed myself."

"I've been meaning to ask you. Why are you wearing that Star of David?"

There were voices in the wind. A family, their faces eager and smarting, was approaching the bulwark they were standing on. Yaniv pushed himself against the wall to let the parade pass. You see, thought Adina, he is perfectly nice. But why am I still afraid of him? She hated how irrational her fear was. Down below, waves splashed over the remains of the harbor, a dodgy rectangle of cracked stones.

Everything here was a shadow of its former glory and yet it wasn't bad to stand here, on top of all this, sometimes very violent, history. You didn't have to conquer a place to feel sovereign over it. It was as if a little piece of the future had been lifted and placed somewhere else, thought Adina, but time kept its balance: there was more of the present now.

"Why are you saying 'that' Star of David? Does that mean you don't like it, huh?"

Adina didn't hesitate: "Was just wondering why you were wearing it, that's all."

"Yeah, because I like it. You're wearing a necklace as well, aren't you?"

"Mine doesn't have a religious symbol." She had several necklaces and one of them, her favorite, was in a V-shape. "I don't understand religion."

Yaniv, shrugging off something painful, took her hand again that had slipped loose. It was a good way to close a conversation. "I'm getting hungry. Do you want to get a bite to eat?"

She succumbed. "Some people wear a Star of David because they're afraid they'll be taken for Arabs."

"Come on," said Yaniv, flinching. They were turning their backs to the ruin, and met several people on the dirt trail, hair flapping in the wind and knightly adventures in their eyes.

Adina looked at Yaniv's dark hair, wheat-colored skin and his chunky body. "You don't look like an Arab. Or maybe mixed with Polish blood."

"All that counts is that I'm very handsome," Yaniv said.

Adina sniffed, but she smiled too. She thought of those shoes next to his bed, how they looked like dancing slippers that a Disney version of her could whirl away on. They probably didn't have any religious or symbolic meaning. "Then we make a handsome pair," she said, and slid her arm under his.

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During that week, the spell of dread seemed to wear off. Maybe I'm falling in love after all, Adina thought. The idea didn't excite her much, though, because love would bring its own unease. The twins and her went about tackling the oranges. In addition to slurping them with oats in breakfast shakes, Adina also made orange chutney, orange tart and marmalade, with recipes she pulled from cooking blogs. It was a nice distraction also to tell friends and family what great experience the fruit picking had been and would they like to take over a kilo of oranges? In the end she had to wrest her eyes and mind away from the habit of orange hunting in strange places in her flat, because they were too soon gone.

Yaniv didn't phone or text her, and she considered herself too preoccupied with the orange industry to have a mind to contact him again. When he finally rang up, he sounded dry, like a squeezed orange, Adina thought, chuckling to herself. She apologized she hadn't been in touch. When she told him about the oranges, he sounded surprised. "I didn't know you had kids," he said.

"Of course I have kids," she said, still in an amused tone. "Do you know anyone who doesn't?"

"I assumed you were single. You don't look like a mother. Your body looks untainted."

Insulted, she said: "I'm divorced, just like you." She was going to add something necessarily harsh, when her young son shook her knee, asking her to intervene. Apparently they were fighting about the bug-eyed doll again. It was unbelievable. They had four of those dolls, pretty indistinguishable in her eyes, and yet they wanted her to believe that only one of them was able to satisfy their fetish? "Not now, Idan," she said. He kept standing there, touching her knee, looking at her intently as if she were a TV hero that he saw in real life for the first time. She bent forwards and whispered in the boy's ear: "if you play quietly with the other doll now, mommy is going to make you a nice cup of tea with honey and we'll bake chocolate chip cookies together. How about that?" Idan's eyes glimmered. "But only you and me bake the cookies. Not Maya." "Of course not." He walked off to play with his dollhouse.

"Anyway," Yaniv was saying. "Children are the future."

"Do you have any more half-baked clichés that can illuminate the crunch of a parent?" she asked.

He snorted, not a hundred percent amused.

Adina looked at the scene in front of her and couldn't imagine it would change anytime at all. The present hung over it, neat and arranged, like a genie that was released from his bottle, answering every wish. The wall, covered with shelves overloaded with knickknacks, photos, books and toys, lots of toys for the twins, shone bright like a universe of achievements. But the spell was fragile, it stretched thin like a membrane that the future could rip between two giant shovel hands, toss it around and blow the smithereens through with terror. Any his beck and call, it could hold her captive with misgivings and fear.

She asked Yaniv about his plans for the weekend, and he told her he had to spend time with his kids. To make her feel she wasn't left out, he began to enumerate scenarios she would be part of. "Now that I know you have two six-year olds, there are so many lovely things we can do," he said. "Soon the weather will turn and we could go camping in the Negev. I was there a few months ago with my kids and we stayed in a special place with a Bedouin tent. My kids were a little bit disconcerted at first because they couldn't use their phones, but they told me they loved it. I'm sure you will too. During the day we'll go hiking around the waterfalls. You do like camping, don't you? Great! I know lots of people don't. They're afraid of scorpions or snakes, or they hate sand and mud on their shoes. Or, if we don't want to go camping, we could also try out that new eco-village near Acre. You can't imagine what peace comes over you when you walk in the hill above it in the evening, and everything is quiet, except some owls hooting in the coppice and the only impediment to seeing the stars as clear as they were made is when grunting boars condense the air as they jog themselves out of breath. You know, soon our family is going for a trip to the Dead Sea, to lounge in the sun, sip fruit smoothies and tell stories around the buffet, nothing special, but we can have our own family outing, or combine it with the Bedouin adventure, which isn't so far from it. What do you think?"

"Yes, Adina said.

Those things would never happen.

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