

Word Count: 4,500

The Gentle Cycle

1

My brother Yoav has this slightly peculiar, docile son who dotes on his mother. He prefers for his mother to pick him up from school. His mother packs his pastrami sandwiches entirely lettuce-free. Going on a trip without his mother is “hard” for him. He shops for cargo trousers and matching camouflage tees with his mother. Only his mother can watch him while he’s taking his swimming lessons. He will be dragged to his paternal grandparents strictly during visitation. His mother remembers which page they were in that book he likes to be read from at night.

Stav is his mother’s mouthpiece: if she says she can have his own telephone, this is the Law, and his father will fork out the expense because he is in charge of Extras. If she says that you can only eat apples that are peeled but potatoes are to be cooked in their skins, this Law will be applied in Yoav’s home with more fastidiousness than

keeping kosher is in religious families. Whatever we've tried, explaining that different people have different habits and viewpoints, his mother's sanction is his anchor.

Our parents' window is full of pictures.

Stav in between his father and mother, smiling.

Stav in between his father and me, smiling.

Stav in between his two nieces, his head the size of a basketball; his huge smile winning out.

Stav between our parents, smiling.

Stav next to his Mum, smiling.

Stav next to his Dad, smiling.

“Kids get used to anything,” says Yoav. “Faster than you can say divorce.”

Meanwhile I find it impossible to try to guess what is going on in that football head -- correction: basketball head.

Stav has inherited my brother's looks, but at least at this age I have no doubt that his intelligence and emotional development are on a totally different plane. Stav has Yoav's long legs, but without his muscles. His knock knees makes his walk look hesitant; everything that he does makes him look hesitant. His upper torso could one day sprout massive wings like his father's, but Stav has added a pot belly. He's inherited his Dad's healthy round cheeks, but Stav's make him look like a chubby chef. He has the weirdest smile. Although his mouth and lips are the same as his father's, when Stav smiles there is an ironic curl that seems as if it's tantalizing you to unscramble it. If owls could smile, they'd smile like that. It's enough to make me

nervous when he smiles at me like that. And boy, does he smile a lot! To top it all off, they have similar hair, but Stav's isn't cropped, and unfortunately those choppy curls flying off his forehead create a neglected impression.

"Us adults," reflects Yoav. "We're different. We remember what could have been."

I've always believed it's rather self-defeating when parents insist that their child follow in their footsteps, or even develop the same interests. Yoav has this thing that he does all the repairs at home by himself. He will even take on his motorcycle except when it involves making use of a 10,000 shekel lift that only the garage can feasibly own. He reformats my laptop and puts Ubuntu on it, tampers with our parents' burglar alarm system or any appliance around their house. He won't ever give up on a dead machine. My husband won't have Yoav touch our car. He prefers to take it to the garage because they keep it only one day. I think Yoav is trying to make himself indispensable by doing all these fixing jobs.

Yoav told me, with great pride, that Stav mended a flat on his bike all by himself, and he's learnt to open the printer drawers to retrieve a jammed page. He's also taught him how to upload pictures to his cycling blog. (On tours under 50 km, he takes Stav with him.) I didn't take that as evidence of his technical prowess: these days, does any child exist that doesn't know how to upload photos to their social widget? Mine have been able to do that since they were six.

Yoav pointed out that he doesn't allow Stav to keep a social profile.

"And does Ilana let him?"

Yoav sighed. "She does. She doesn't care. And of course it wouldn't be of any concern to her that I don't think it is necessary -- I mean, harmful."

On a Tuesday, when I came round to pick up my new phone, they had moved the coffee table aside and were both huddled over metal and plastic parts that were laid out on the tacky Sinai blanket. Yoav rose and kissed me on the cheek.

“What is that?” I asked. “Are you building a submarine?”

“You’re getting close. The washing machine went on the fritz. At first it wouldn’t do the gentle cycle anymore, and now it’s just flushing water. I think it has decided it’s a toilet now. When Stav came here right after school I knew I had my man to help me diagnose the malfunction. Right, Stav?”

Stav smiled his wicked grin at me and continued his task: wiping a rag over a rocket-like spool.

“You must have had it how long? Fifteen years? You might consider replacing it.”

“Yes. Noooh,” said Yoav. “Washers are simple gizmos. After the baby monitor, it must be the simplest thing that we keep in our homes. They basically consist of an engine that drives the pump and an agitator that spins the tub. Stav, show your aunt the engine, love.”

Stav smiled down at the collection on the blanket. He held up a round object.

“No, that’s the transmission. Look again, Stav.” He turned back to me. “Stav’s such a clever boy. Of course they don’t teach them mechanics in school. I wonder why not, you know. It’s more useful than knowing that a starved Jew used to be nicknamed a Muselmann. I mean, the past is dead.”

I began: “So why do you keep your old...”

“Mum says that they never taught you anything in school. She says that!”

Stav's dark eyes went white with the shine of mirth. He held up his round face, and his lips curled sinuously until they opened. The tip of his tongue was just teasing with ridicule.

Yoav stood stock-still for two seconds. His back stiffened. "I told Mum that," he said calmly. "It's true. I never did learn much at school. I'm self-taught, isn't that right, Marina? I was always taking things apart, like we are now."

"Yes," I said. "You were born brilliant. You could have been a subcontractor for Apple, Samsung and Philips; all of them together."

"Well, now I'm subcontractor for some local companies and they're serving the foreign markets very nicely, thank you. So I'm not doing much worse than I could have." Briskly, he wheeled round to Stav. "Stav, sugar, tell your Aunt Marina where they're teaching you more: at school or at home?"

"Mum helps me an awful lot with my homework when I'm having trouble sometimes." It sounded rehearsed, but his smile was broadening deviously.

At the mention of her, Yoav turned limp. His energy flowed out of him and he turned into a meek puppet of a father.

"Right," he said, after he'd swallowed a few times. "Now, Stav," he said tenderly, "I wonder where this connects to? Can you help me find the part?"

It took them a while. After he stood up, Yoav handed me my phone. He made me great coffee, like he always does, on his reassembled espresso machine that he patched together from beachcombing in front of Caesarea's villas. It made as much of a racket as his cursed motorbike. As he was warming up the milk, the worktop

convulsed in tremors as if it were hit by a Big Bang, and I shouted at the top of my voice: “No milk! I don’t drink milk in espresso.”

2

It was a big mistake to get married to that woman and bring Stav into the world with her. I’ve hinted as much to Yoav, several times even, because I’m a bit of a *nudnik*, which, quite understandably, makes him fly in a hot rage. He grumbles that I hardly have any right of speaking, because I have such an insanely tight-knitted little family.

“It’s all about the choices that we make in life,” I tell him; which makes him even madder. “So I took a wrong turn, that’s what you’re telling me,” he says forcefully. “And that’s why everything I undertake is met with the opposite effect. I see. I’ve simply had it coming.”

“All I’m saying is you’re like the two faces of Janus on a great many things and naturally Stav is getting confused, so he chooses his mother’s side because that makes it easier for him. It’s usually the mother whose life revolves around her kids, isn’t it?”

“Mine pretty much revolves around him, since you’re asking. There is nobody in the world that I love more. No offence, but not even you. So do you advise me just to let go? Just play along and disassociate; like a fucking Zen Buddhist?”

“Sure. *We* try to agree on subjects that concern our daughters,” I said.

“Well, *we* don’t talk,” Yoav snapped.

“Stav is a bright boy,” I’ve heard him say many times while tears were stinging his eyes. He kept repeating it like a mantra. “Stav is my bright boy. He is one of us.”

At that time he was carefully sweeping together the hundreds of shards from the kitschy crystal menorah, that moments before had crowned our parents’ dinner table. My girls were pointing excitedly at those fragments shining on the tile like jewelry. Stav had pulled the tablecloth until it tilted and smashed to the floor. Awkwardly, it wasn’t when he was sitting down and inadvertently leaned his elbow in the wrong place; no -- it happened while he was setting the table.

“No, no, don’t touch that or you’ll get a splinter in your finger. Just you have a sit down.”

His smile only slightly dented, Stav perched onto the settee, carefully avoiding the newspaper supplements with which it was covered because Yoav had to catch up when at our parents. The boy’s wide eyes were roaming the room helplessly as if searching for a way to escape. Dad pulled himself away from his emails and Mum from stuffing the oven with vegetable quiches; both were trying not to look concerned. Nobody else in our family is only remotely gauche. Pressing on my daughters' legs so they wouldn't get up with me, I went over to stroke Stav's hair and reassured him it was “nothing.”

I felt sorry for Yoav the most when we went on family trips. Stav hasn’t joined us since the divorce.

It’s been seven years. Stav was only one and a half. He has no recollection of his parents ever having been together.

Every year during Pesach we were committed to filling our week at the Club Hotel in Tiberias. As Dad rose through the ranks, he thankfully sold his timeshare. So now we're free to go wherever we want. Or rather, where Mum and Dad decide we should go, but we can make suggestions. This spring, for instance, we went to Ramot on the other side of the lake, and we found the resort a lot more stylish and relaxed than that dowdy Club Hotel. The absence of any Arab cousins mercifully spared us the noise of cracking nuts and snapping fingers to Umm Kulthum on their balconies under our bedrooms long after midnight.

Every year, Yoav keeps up his hopes that Stav will join him on this outing, which is the supposed highpoint of our family life; the consolidation and the celebration of our bond. Surviving those five days together causes a bit of pressure, but when all is said and done, when Pesach comes round again, we're ready for our fix of fun, sun and genial squabbles.

Of course it was all delightful again this year. I read romance novels on the beach, and Mum took the girls for a shivery dip in Lake Kinneret. Meanwhile, Yoav and my husband went cycling around it and Dad followed them in the car, which was laden with water tanks because surely they'd be overcome by the heat, and afterwards he was angry because they didn't need his water (they had two bottles strapped onto their bikes and didn't even get off). We played monopoly and "Cluedo" on our balcony. We went rafting on the Jordan River and nervously condemned the fish that we wanted for lunch in a seafood restaurant. We played hide and seek among the columns of Capernaum, where ecstatic pilgrims forgave us for overrunning their picnic plates. We hiked to the Jilabun waterfall and ate *faux* salami sandwiches while around us hundreds of poppies were bobbing in the stubbly grass. The people who

didn't have their nose stuck in a book caught a wild boar sneaking behind a squat oak tree, with her striped piglets in tow.

Stav didn't come.

I loved to get up in the mornings, throw the sun-kissed curtains open and watch the mountains looming on one side and the shimmering light-blue lake on the other. What wasn't pleasant was to cast my eyes to the adjacent balcony and see Yoav sitting there, alone, dissecting the hotel newspaper.

"Why don't you invite her along," Dad had offered Yoav; "if that helps progress the matter. She and Stav can share a room."

After considerable hesitation, Yoav sounded her out. She first said no, because she said that we'd need a bigger car and an extra room and she didn't want to impose on us.

I said: "It's just an excuse about the car, of course. Mum and Dad will sit in front, and you'll three take up the back. Second, I've never noticed that she minds putting you to expenses. If she did, she wouldn't have run off with half your savings."

Then she said yes.

Then she said maybe, because her brother in Haifa had invited her for Pesach.

The definite no came two days before the trip.

It's the same with small trips. In the past few weeks Yoav keeps telling me that he's taking Stav cherry picking. There's an orchard not too far away, but as it's in the territories we don't go there. We stick to flower picking; there are plenty of pick-your-own-flower-farms if you drive a few kilometers south.

First Yoav announces Stav and he are going cherry picking on Friday 18 May. Then he says it's in two weeks. Then he reminds me again that next week they're going cherry picking. Finally, he unfolds his plan for Friday. He'll pick up Stav from school, which on Fridays is only until half past 11. Or maybe, he says optimistically, he'll make Stav miss school, if he doesn't have anything important on that day.

So Friday I shepherd the girls in at our parents' where we are invited for lunch and who do I see reading the paper on the settee: Yoav. Stav sits next to him twirling his thumbs.

"How was the cherry picking?" I ask.

Stav mumbles something. He's smiling.

Yoav puts down his newspaper calmly, but I know him. "We didn't go."

My daughters grip onto my hands. Sometimes I feel as if those girls are my external alarm sensors. I feign surprise. "Why not?"

Stav lowers his paper too. "I didn't feel like it," he answers.

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

I'm not completely sure how the mechanics of this work, because I lack experience in this field, but I'm guessing that as long as my brother keeps getting upset about what Stav does or doesn't do, there's no chance he'll bring home a new partner. When he's pressed to it, he will affirm he's had some affairs, but we've never seen anyone around. He says it's because of Stav, not because he still loves Ilana. He says Stav is still young and needs his Dad, without him having distractions. Another reason is, as

he says, he's always expecting Stav to burst through the door, and if Stav would find him sitting with a woman, well, he (Yoav) would rather die. From what I've seen, however, Stav sticks to his visitation schedule. The bursting in is all in his (my brother's) imagination.

I'm his sister: I can notice the cogs and bolts pulling and grinding; his old wizard heart is longing to make complete. But what he actually needs is distance: to accept that Stav is just a visitor in his life. He doesn't have to be like an astronaut who lands from another planet and, waving insouciantly, steps back into his mothership, but he can't be held against his will. I think that maybe children from divorced families aren't all that different. To use another simile, Stav could be like a plant that roots in the soil of our family, but he'll keep growing and spreading to other places, and those flowers and new shoots that will come out will be uniquely his.

3

Such was the status quo until that extraordinary Shavuot.

They take turns on the holidays and it's better than birthdays because Ilana wasn't to be seen or heard within a million kilometer radius.

In hindsight it really was thrilling. I don't think any of us will ever forget how Stav turned the tables on us.

Some bat flapping, followed by screeching and whistling of birds -- those were the only sounds. In the gassy blue light, my daughters were watching a comic on their tablet that went far above their heads, something cool about a girl that transforms into a ladybug to save the world, so that's why they were subdued. The garden at this time

of day looked big and unknown. The grownups were rather muted too because of the Riesling and the cheeses. One of the cheeses was punctuated with blue spots; its taste was delicate but its smell so pungent and this baffling paradox kept me pretty much entertained in my inebriated state. Mum and I were shortening the wait by munching gleefully on dietetically thin strips that we passed to each other. The only one talking was Dad who was appreciating the girls' technological dexterity. Why should he admit that he doesn't understand anything electronic when he's able to read his email and stare at digital family albums? But he likes to sound *au courant* and that's when his silly questions give him away. To the girls' deaf ears, he was asking how the French-Canadian series they were watching could be spoken in Hebrew.

With a hissing sound, the sprinklers opened their kaleidoscopic umbrellas in the low sun. "Look at that," spoke Dad. He rose and stood with his back to us, then he slowly wandered to the fence so he could have a better view over the jumbled fields. The *Shfela* is a place where the melons start rolling themselves to market because everything is curved. But before they're ripe, the bulldozers will catch up. As a forecast of that, the new development housing was peeping over the adjacent hillcrest, checking us out, the older newcomers.

I was admiring how good Dad looked with our lush garden as a backdrop; where my husband and I had bloodied our hands and knees for years and years. We groveled as slaves so that we could sit like kings in our mini-paradise.

"Such a perfect evening," I sighed. "With Yoav and Stav we really will be complete."

"Where are they anyhow?" squeaked Dad's falsetto. The gloam swallowed up his silhouette, and I could hardly see him scuffling towards us. "Aren't they terribly late?"

Speaking of the devil. Simultaneously, the lanterns switched on, the sound of an engine rumbled round the drive, and my husband cockily marched from the house with a bowl of macaroni salad in one hand, and a dish with steaming pasta in the other. The serving spoon, balanced precariously, clattered down as Stav flew past.

“We’re not late, are we?” Yoav’s voice sounded choked, but I couldn’t check his features because of the backlighting.

“Hag sameach. Happy holidays, everybody.” Stav didn’t hug and kiss anybody, which was new.

Yoav started to say something about it, but his throat choked up again.

“Is something the matter?” I asked him.

“No, no.” He shook his head. Meanwhile his fist was digging furiously in his jeans pocket, ostensibly to bury his car key. “It’s just that Stav told me something really funny while we were driving here. Hey Stav!”

Stav had run off to check out the most interesting thing in the garden.

“I know how to do that!” he said and, with peculiar confidence, grabbed the tablet over the wavy heads of our daughters. Rising as one person, the two girls laid their hands on their precious contraption.

I foresaw a row in which Stav would go to the wall.

“Hey guys,” I called cheerfully. “Put down your playthings and come to the table. Dad knows you love pasta... Stav, this is for you too, lovey.”

That would normally get him down, as he loves eating.

After he had wisely let go of the tablet, he watched his nieces take seats beside me, and whistling dryly, he paced near the log table. When he was small, he used to sing us holiday songs. He belted them out, smiling unselfconsciously with his gums showing and his eyes squeezing out tears of earnestness.

“The thing we were talking in the car just cracked me up,” Yoav tried again. “Do you hear? He no longer eats...”

My attention was on Stav.

“I don’t want to eat cheese or drink milk anymore.”

“Now look ...” his father said. “I ...”

“And eggs.”

“Why won’t you have cheese or milk anymore, lovey?” I asked gently. “It’s okay. Your uncle is making *hummous* right now. Would you like that? Is that okay?”

Stav nodded.

“All children need milk and cheese to make them strong,” said Dad.

“And no eggs,” reiterated Stav.

My daughters were squirming and protesting while being served pasta by their grandmother.

My husband brought in the freshly-blended *hummous*. He was sweating under his hairline.

“Here is the *hummous*!” He proudly smacked the oval dish in the middle.

We're vegetarians, so that's why Shavuot was cut out for us because you eat all these dairy products. My husband's the only one who isn't a vegetarian in our family; he eats meat at work.

"Who wants some?" asked my husband.

Nobody said anything. Maybe they were thinking about the right approach to persuade that kid.

After a long time of slouching around the table, Stav nestled close to his grandfather.

"Who can I serve? What's wrong?" asked my husband, finding a seat. "Have you all swallowed your tongues? I've bloody well worked my ass off on this *hummous*; I think I labored half an hour to achieve its superb creamy texture. I thought you all loved the stuff." He spooned a large dollop on his plate and dipped in his whole-wheat bread slice with gusto, then spoke with his mouth full. "While it's not Abu Hassan, it's not bad at all."

"Stav told us he doesn't want to eat dairy anymore," I explained.

"No, eggs, milk, and cheese," detailed Stav.

"Yes, love, I understand. And why don't you want to eat dairy anymore?"

Yoav threw down his spoon. "My son will get bowlegs because of a calcium deficit? I mean, on top of his knock knees. It's because of his mother. Was this her idea, Stav?"

"No, it wasn't. This is what I want."

"Come on, it must be. It can't be otherwise," said Yoav weakly. He was visibly losing his nerve. He had a spasm in his arm muscle. Then his jaws clamped tight. "Has your mother gone vegan?"

“Like ...?” I asked, trying to be helpful.

“I know what that is,” said Stav, smiling brightly. “Mum eats an egg and cottage for breakfast.”

“Oh, come on, she’s eating eggs and you’re not eating eggs? I don’t believe that. And why would you stop eating eggs?”

“Because I don’t want to eat baby chicks.”

“They’re not baby chicks. They haven’t hatched yet. They’re embryos.”

“I don’t want to eat embryos,” said Stav, smiling calmly. “And I don’t want to drink milk from cows that stand in their own poop. It’s disgusting and cruel.”

Yoav’s blue eyes were flashing so hard that they turned the color of metal. “You’re going to eat now, everything that is on the table, until I speak to your mother.”

Instead of eating, Stav was clutching a small mineral water bottle with a cartoon figure and a Disney logo which read: “Master of Every Thing.”

“Yoav,” I said. But he was too angry. He was slapping cheese-covered pasta on his son’s plate.

“I don’t want it. I don’t want it!” The smile had slid off Stav’s face. He was crying. I could see his pink gums.

“I’ll speak to your mother after this. What was she thinking? Precisely when it’s Shavuot; you’ve timed it so it’s the feast of milk and honey and you’re refusing to eat cheese?”

“Yoav.” I held his arm. “Don’t say it.”

“It’s just me,” bawled Stav. “Mum doesn’t know about it. You’re the first I told.”

“I don’t believe that, man. You don’t go to the loo without your Mum’s consent.”

Yoav kept flicking my hand away. He heaped his son’s plate with cheeses and macaroni and then topped it off with two slices of bread. “Now eat.”

My husband reached out to ladle *hummous* on a separate plate. “Just let him have *hummous*, for goodness’ sake.”

“Eat!”

“I want to go home!”

“We’ll go home after supper.”

“I want to go home to Mum.”

Grabbling for his mobile, Yoav bounded from the table. He paced swiftly to the back of the garden, and then round the drive, where his agitated voice trailed away. With the evening breeze ruffling his bangs around his oafish forehead, Stav was packing away *hummous*. Mum handed him a whole-wheat bread slice, and then another. Soon Stav returned to his smiling self. He slurped copiously from his “Master of Every Thing.” My girls stared at him and then copied him.

After what seemed a long time, Yoav emerged round the corner again. He looked at all of us with a light in his eyes; it was the look of love of someone whose love has long been suppressed by anger and fear of competition, and now finally is liberated to reach its full expression.

“She’s got nothing to do with this. Stav’s visited a farm with his class.”

“Yeah, so?”

“She's got nothing to do with it!”

“She's got nothing to do with it!”