

## Sunset\*

Ayelet Gundar

He was thinking it was the most beautiful sunset he'd ever seen, when his motorcycle ran into the man. And in the moment just after he hit him he was still thinking about the sunset, kept on thinking about the sunset, and then stopped suddenly, like a candle blown out.

"My God, Yotam, you hit him. You hit him."

Einat's voice was strangely high, and though he didn't look back he knew she was trembling. He got off and heard the crunch of gravel under his feet. A different country. They'd gone almost five hours without stopping. On the way, they'd passed villages and fields and the carcass of a cow whose stench stayed with them for a kilometer. In the place they'd left, the sand swallowed your steps. Now there was gravel.

He drew close to the man lying on the road. An Indian, about forty, perhaps fifty, he could never tell for sure how old these people were. At the end of the trek in Ladakh he'd given a tip to the man who'd led the horses. The man's gratitude had flattered him and he'd added a few perfunctory questions with a friendliness that at the time felt genuine: What's your name? How many children do you have? How old are you? His name was Tenzin and he had three children and he was the same age as Yotam, though he looked a decade older. In this country, the people are born old and die young, and what's in between? When he asked the man for his exact date of birth he discovered they were born a day apart. But none of it meant anything. Now this man, forty or perhaps fifty, was lying in the road, a pulpy mess. Yotam had already seen such things in war, but then they were Arabs.

Behind him, Einat threw up. The sky was a little redder than before and you could hear the birds calling each other frantically.

"They no fly in the dark," the guide had explained to them on the trek, a guide whose name he couldn't remember now. "They must find a place before the sun go, or they can die."

They'd laughed a lot at the guide's English. Yotam did imitations for his mother when he called home. She laughed and asked when he'd be back and he said he'd call again in two weeks.

"See if he's breathing."

"He is."

"How can you tell from here?"

"I can tell."

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“But Yotam—”

“If you don’t believe me check for yourself.”

He heard her behind him — shallow, rapid breathing. Crying, perhaps. Three steps on the gravel and she was kneeling beside this man, her loose black hair brushed the ground and the Indian’s face.

“Breathing.”

Now he hated her and admired her and came and knelt beside her. The Indian was wearing a plaid shirt with buttons and brown pants with a belt. He looked like all those men they’d seen on the trains, on the buses, at reception desks at guest houses. So similar that even when he asked a man’s name he forgot it the same day, or he would use it for his cousin or brother or whoever it was who came to take over at the reception desk. Yes, he was exactly like all those others except that his jawbone was smashed. And his nose.

“You take him to the village on the motorcycle and I’ll stay here.”

“Are you nuts?”

“You’re right. He can’t be moved. I’ll stay here with him and you go to the village and get help.”

“No way.”

“Why not? It’s only an hour from here to the village, you said so yourself.”

“You mean an hour from here to an Indian jail.”

Einat looked at him. Her lips were parted slightly, showing the narrow gap between her two front teeth, which on ordinary days embarrassed her and aroused him and now did nothing for him.

“They’ll throw us in jail, Einat. They’ll throw us in jail.”

“The Foreign Ministry will intervene. Or we’ll bribe the policemen, the way they do here with everything else. If we don’t do something this man will die.”

And as she uttered the naked word, he suddenly felt all his internal organs icing over. White frost spread from his liver to his stomach, from his stomach to his intestine, through the snakelike bends he knew from his textbooks. The winding intestines go on for six to eight meters. More than three times the height of a person. The diameter is three centimeters but it changes with age, and they take up most of the abdomen. The small intestine is divided into the duodenum, the jejunum, and the ileum. Yotam drew a strange calm, a frozen white calm, from reviewing this information. He focused on the small intestine. He examined it. The area of its interior surface, for example, is increased by finger-like protrusions called villi. These structures increase the surface area of the small intestine 500-fold, to up to about 250 square meters. Amazing. Simply amazing. And to think that he was once contemptuous of all this information, did not understand why they were wasting so much valuable time on it in the medics’ course. Now he truly appreciated his studies. A fortified wall of knowledge that stood between him and that filthy word: *die*. If they didn’t do something, this Indian would die.

Einat gave him a piercing look. He knew it without looking at her. Her eyes, not particularly large or especially beautiful, could look at you in a way that would make you feel them from the other side of the room. Einat knew how to look at things, really look. And things knew she was looking at them, and that made them behave a little differently. Cats, people, clouds in the sky. Even traffic signs. Now she was looking at him that way.

He would have liked her to stop, he really would have liked her to stop. But if he said that, he would have to look at her, and if he looked at her he would no longer see the beautiful bends of the small intestine, and that was something he could not lose. So he got up and walked five steps toward the cliff, looked down at the twisting road climbing up the mountain in sharp bends, less tight than bends of the small intestine but nonetheless definitely satisfying. Definitely.

The sky changed from red to purple and the birds stopped shrieking. Yotam thought about all the places they had already managed to visit. All the beautiful places they had already managed to leave. The first month they were still telling themselves they would return to this place, and that enabled them to get on the motorcycle and move on. Leaving behind the cabin on the banks of the stream, the snow-capped ridge, the little village with the shrine at the foot of the hill. Later they understood that they would not be coming back to this place, and even if they did, the return wouldn't be to all the other places. It was impossible to go back to all the others. The moment they understood that, they started going slower. They took fewer pictures. They looked a lot. And once Einat said that maybe, nevertheless, they would keep that promise, maybe years later, after the degree and the future children whose faces were still blurry in their minds, maybe nevertheless they would come back. They would follow the exact same route. Village by village. Trek by trek. And he knew that it would be terrible and grabbed her head between his hands and told her that it was forbidden, forbidden, forbidden to go back to a place you loved because it is never the same, only an echo. He looked at the Indian again. Blood oozed from his head and stained the collar of his plaid shirt. Goodbye to East Asian studies at Tel Aviv University. Goodbye to the great meeting with Ohad and Tamir in Katmandu. And the Indian kept on bleeding, as if he were doing it on purpose.

“It's not like they have a hospital, you know, it's more like a butcher shop with bandages.”

“You're not really suggesting we leave him here.”

“That's exactly what I'm suggesting. There's no point in bringing him to the village, he'll die in any case.”

“And if it were an Israeli?”

She looked right at him now, and he had to look back at her.

“But it's not an Israeli. It's a fifty-year-old Indian in a country where the life expectancy is fifty-seven.”

“How do you know?”

“It says so in the *Lonely Planet*.”

Einat was silent for a moment. She sighed.

“Check his pulse.”

She did not look at him when he put two fingers under the Indian's right wrist. Nor when he pretended he was counting the heartbeats. It was better that the lie he was about to hand her should touch her as little as possible. And later, when he would tell her again about Lebanon and she would ask more and more until he cried and she hugged his head in the bed and felt motherly and strong and slightly aroused, she would be able to think that he was good and pure. A pure angel with curls.

“Very weak. He doesn't have a chance.”

He spoke in a quiet and confident voice and knew that he was lying. Even without estimating the pulse he knew he was lying. But still he spoke in a quiet and confident voice, like then, in the war, when he'd said to Eran, “The chopper's coming, I swear they're coming,” and knew there was no chopper because their radio wasn't working, and he'd repeated to himself the holy trinity of “Einat, motorcycle, India; Einat, motorcycle, India,” raising the volume as needed to drown out Eran's screams.

Einat got up. Yotam laid the Indian's hand back on the ground and got up too. Now they would go. They would get on the motorcycle and ride on from here. They would continue their trip. When they got tired of it they would return to Israel. Perhaps many years later they would talk about it. About the Indian. Perhaps they would feel guilty. It would be okay to feel guilty many years later. That was not like now.

But at that moment the Indian opened his eyes. Einat and Yotam froze. The air became thinner and their tongues tasted like sandpaper. At their feet, right next to their waterproof trekking shoes, lay the Indian whose nose was broken, whose face was smashed, and whose eyes were wide open.

He did not look at Einat. Nor at Yotam. He just lay there and stared at the sky, stared at it with such concentration that Einat could not resist a sideward glance up, at the point he was staring at — perhaps there was something there after all. There was nothing. Only the amazing sunset, the glowing deep purple sky, as if someone had photoshopped it. Since they'd landed she'd been trying to find a picture that would be as good as those in the travel guides, and here she'd found it. The monks they encountered always looked less authentic than those in the pictures in the book, and the mountains always looked lower. Now the sun was bleeding in computer-graphic colors and painting the man below her purple.

The taste of her thumb in her mouth surprised Einat. For four months she had not bitten it, since they'd landed in India. For years she'd tried to break the habit, which recurred whenever she was under stress. Before sports competitions in elementary school. In the midst of exams at the end of high school. In boot camp. A month after Yuval's funeral she still had tooth marks on it. But from the moment she'd landed here, not even once. As if, when she'd packed her knapsack, she'd left the thumb-biting at home, waiting for her in her room, next to the piles of clothes and books. And she'd hoped that when she got back she would toss it out altogether, as she would clear out the clothes that were out of style or the books that were out of date. And suddenly this bitten thumb, here, with the mountains and the glowing purple sunset. As if the thumb-biting had been waiting in ambush all along for the right moment. After all, she couldn't really shed her past as a snake sloughs off its skin. And suddenly she hated the Indian with a powerful, blazing hatred. His contemptuous grimace. Those open eyes, brown, deceptive, like the eyes of the guest-house owners when it came time to set the price.

Almost by force she pulled her thumb out from between her teeth. Now she stood with her arms hanging at her sides, her hands clenched. Yotam's posture was almost identical, his clenched fingers white at the knuckles from the strain. If they had looked at each other they would have been amazed at how similar their postures were. But their eyes remained fastened on the eyes of the Indian; they couldn't look away even if they wanted to. For one long moment the Indian gazed at the sky. For one long moment they gazed at the Indian.

When the Indian turned his eyes from the sky to them, Einat let out a moan of surprise, which was not particularly different from what she let out at the moment of penetration. A little sound of the intake of air just at the moment the body is penetrated by

a new presence. Because now the Indian had ceased gazing at the purple of the sky and was looking at the faces of the people above him. A young man with curly golden hair and large blue eyes and the face of a boy. A young woman with loose black hair and brown eyes and that chewed thumb in her mouth. Again his eyes turned to the sky.

Yotam knew that now he would speak and he knew what he would say. He just didn't know how to do it, how the hell to command his body to get up and do it. For more than a minute he struggled with his tongue until it obeyed, and even then his voice sounded distant and strange as he turned to Einat and said, “Get on the motorcycle.”

Einat did not move.

“Now.”

She turned and went to the motorcycle. He went after her. She opened her bag and took out the woolen shawl he had bought her two days before in Dharamsala. She closed the bag. He opened his bag and took out an almost full package of cookies and a bottle of water. He closed the bag. They covered the Indian with the shawl and laid the cookies and water next to him. He looked at them. They did not look at him. Yotam went back to the motorcycle. He took out his wallet and pulled out a hundred-rupee note. On second thought, two hundred. He went over to the Indian. He decided to look at him. And in truth, it appeared that the Indian had resigned himself to his situation with that famous Buddhist equanimity, because indeed he had closed his eyes and was just breathing quietly, and his face showed a grimace that was not very different from a smile. Yotam laid the rupee notes between the bottle of water and the cookies. Now it was certain that the Indian was smiling at him, expressing approval with his closed eyes. Yotam went to the motorcycle. Einat followed him. They got on the motorcycle. She wanted to look back, but knew that she would turn into a pillar of salt. So she looked forward. So did Yotam. Only forward. He held the handlebars and Einat held on to his waist, and she held on so hard that the marks from her nails remained on his waist for many days after. The sky changed from purple to black. An hour later they were in the village.

He lay with her in the room in the guest house even though she had not offered and he didn't really want to. She cried a little and then they went to the shower. There was no hot water, so they washed quickly and went out to eat. The waiter in the restaurant asked what they would like. He was wearing a buttoned beige shirt and brown pants. He quoted prices that were higher than those on the menu, and Yotam bargained with him.

“Do you want pasta or pizza?”

“I'm not hungry.”

“You have to eat. Do you want pasta or pizza?”

“I want to go home.”

“They have shakshuka. Do you want shakshuka?”

“Okay. Shakshuka.”

They ate the tomato-and-egg dish, which was not bad at all, and for dessert had a pancake, which was as bad as usual, and went to sleep. The next morning they got on the motorcycle and rode on. Slowly, very slowly. Their thoughts were viscous and sticky, and the humidity and dust covered them. Then they went fast. Very fast. The road twisted between the mountains, in sharp, beautiful bends. The wind turned cool. The sunset was amazing. Truly amazing. They took a picture and sent it home by e-mail.