

Waking Up

The harsh light that came through the window awakened him. He wondered – the bedroom window was facing west, where the sun strikes only at evening. He opened his eyes. He was not in his bedroom and the direction of the sun rays suggested the time was near midday. He looked round him. The room looked like a hotel room, but on the chest near him he saw a framed photo of a woman. She wasn't his wife, but she looked familiar.

“So... Are you finally awake?” he heard.

He raised his eyes. In front of him, where there was nothing just a moment ago, he saw a young woman who looked very familiar.

Just a moment... She was the one who had been riding with him each morning toward school. He had been a driver on this line for fifteen years. When he saw her first she had been just a little girl. She came to the bus and asked him very seriously: “How are you, Mister Driver? How do you feel today?”

She had been riding his bus daily ever since. He watched her grow up and become an adolescent. He saw her courted by the boys in the higher classes, then become a young woman and a soldier. She did not come home very often during that period. He used to see her only on Sunday mornings and sometimes on Thursday evenings, if he worked the late shift.

Then she became a civilian again. She would ride with him four stations only and then change for the bus to the university. Sometimes she rode back with him when he worked late.

Three years later she rode with him to school again. She was a teacher now, teaching in the same school where she used to be a pupil.

She continued asking “How are you? How do you feel?” It was a kind of ritual – she didn't even expect an answer.

Sometimes, although rarely, she would stay a little longer near him and give him brief glimpses into her life.

What was she doing here, with him in this hotel room?

"I thought you wanted me," she said sarcastically, "but once you saw the bed - you simply fell asleep!"

But he didn't want her. He had married a few months after starting to work as a bus driver and had been faithful to his wife ever since – in deed and in thought. *There could never be anyone like her, not even in a million!*

How did he arrive in this room? He couldn't remember. He only remembered starting the morning tour as usual. On the third station this young woman came in, then...? Nothing. And where is the door to this room? He could see no door.

The young woman looked at him and started crying.

"Don't cry" he said, giving her his hand, trying to console her.

"It's easy for you to tell me not to cry" – it was his wife's voice. *Where did she come from? Where is the other woman?*

"How can I not cry? After fifteen years together, three kids and innumerable concessions you are leaving me. What wouldn't I do for you? I gave up studying 'cause you didn't want your wife to be better educated than you. I brought you three children, though I wanted only one girl, 'cause you wanted a big family. I tried with you in the bed whatever craziness you happened to see on those magazines – 'cause you wanted. Why do I deserve this?!" she continued crying.

"I really didn't do anything" he said. He rose out of bed – he was still in his driver's uniform.

"Yes, it's about time you started moving. Your passengers are waiting." It was the voice of his manager who was suddenly with him in this room.

"Daddy, come! How long can I wait?" It was the voice of his thirteen-year old son, but he couldn't see him.

He could not see anybody, really. Then he couldn't see anything at all. The light in the window disappeared. He heard a strong noise and fell back on the bed.

When he woke up again it was dark. He couldn't see where he was, but it surely wasn't home. He heard muffled noises. Somebody whispered. Somebody cried. Somebody wept. None of it had any meaning. He heard somebody praying, but he felt this was not a synagogue. Then he heard that muffled noise again. He knew he should do something but he did nothing.

It was the smell that woke him next. He didn't have to open his eyes to know where he was. He already knew this smell from the three times he was with his wife in the delivery room; from that time he visited a friend who barely escaped a terrorist attack and another who was involved in an accident and yet another who had a heart-attack. *This was the smell of hospitals and he was in bed. This couldn't be a good sign.* He felt pain, especially in the chest. *A heart-attack? Impossible. The heart is not on the right side. Then what?*

He tried to open his eyes. He felt as if somebody was forcefully trying to stop him, but he didn't cease. After a long struggle he succeeded – first the right eye, then the left. His sight was blurred; he could only see shadows. He tried to move his hand only to discover he couldn't. *Had somebody tied it to the bed, or couldn't he control it?*

"He opened his eyes! Quick! Call the doctor or the nurse!" It was his wife's voice. *Why was she here?*

"The doctor said he will come at once." – the voice was familiar... from the bus... that girl... *what was she doing here?*

He could see a little better now. Around his head were several poles with infusion bags, their tubes wandering out of his field of sight. Something was stuck in his mouth – he couldn't speak, and one of his nostrils was also blocked. *No...*

There's a tube there as well. How do they expect him to breathe this way?

He wanted to turn his head in the direction of the talking but it was impossible.

Somebody came near his side. A white robe. A stethoscope. Young face. *How old could he be? Thirty? Thirty-five? Surely not more.*

"Hello. I'm Dr. Shamir. If you can hear me, try to blink twice. The rest of your body is... restrained. Do you understand?"

He tried to blink. It wasn't easy, but he managed to close his eyes for a moment, open them again and then close them once more. He could barely find the energy to open his eyes again.

"That's fine" said the doctor as he left his field of vision. "There is some advance. He blinked, but it seems to be still very difficult for him. We should let him rest some more before trying again."

"Doctor, will he recover?" it was his passenger's voice.

"Let's hope so. He had been very lucky until now. We should hope his luck will hold on."

He didn't hear any more. His eyes were closing. He only wondered in what way he was lucky, but he could not guess.

"Good morning. How are we today?" The professional voice of the nurse had disgusted him. *He couldn't blame her, of course. She was trying to do her best, and her voice was even pleasant, but how could he feel while connected to all this tubing and unable to even speak?*

Her hand appeared in his view, reached to his brow and touched it. "It looks like his fever is down. Once he is disconnected from the respiration machine we'll be able to measure his temperature much better."

"When will he be disconnected? Will it be today?" – his wife's voice.

“Only the doctors could say, but I believe it’s going to be soon.”

Respiration machine? Why? What had happened to him?

“Do you think he can hear us?” - that was his wife.

“He probably can. He responded to the doctor yesterday and this night’s rest seems to have helped him as well.”

A white robe. Pleasant face. A severe expression. “Are you awake? Very good. Soon the doctors will come to check you, and if everything is fine you’ll be able to talk again very soon. Blink twice if you understand me.”

He blinked once, and once again. It was not as difficult as the last time. *Had it been yesterday?*

The severe face lit up with a smile and looked suddenly almost childish – like the face of his ten-year old daughter. He tried to see more, but the bed and the instruments around it left very little to see.

He napped until the doctors came. He could do nothing else anyway.

The doctors were all around him talking. He didn’t understand most of it, but he managed to grasp a few words: “invasive wound”, “torn muscle”, “punctured lung”, “near the heart” and mainly “very lucky” and “a lot of luck”. *Something had happened. In the bus?* He tried desperately to remember. Something had happened there – it was on the threshold of his memory – but he could not remember.

“Good morning. I’m Professor Coleman. In about an hour we will move you to the treatment room, where you will be mildly anesthetized and we’ll take the respiration tube out. In a few days you will be able to talk again.”

A few days! How long had he been here? Days? Weeks? More?...

His wife entered his field of view. She didn’t look well. She had no makeup and had black rings around her eyes and tears in her eyes, but her mouth smiled. “Have you heard? They are

finally going to remove that tube. You will be able to talk!” and she started crying. *Was it relief? Fear?* It was hard for him to see her crying while he could not even console her. He closed his eyes.

Another voice was talking. He opened his eyes again. His passenger had returned. “Do you remember me?” she asked. He blinked twice. “Great! You will be well – I’m sure. We all owe you so much!” *Who? Why?* He didn’t understand but he could not ask.

A few hours later, when he was awake again, he felt somewhat freer. The tube was no longer in his throat, his head could be moved freely and his right hand was also free, but he could also feel much more pain: his right side ached with every breath and he had constant pains on his left. His stomach ached a lot and so did his left arm and his right knee. There were probably other pains as well, but he could not discern them.

He heard some voices at his side and turned his head. His wife was there, crying, and his passenger was supporting her. He saw that the passenger was bandaged in several places and walked with a limp. *Something had happened to her. Actually, something happened to him as well.* The last thing he remembered was that morning bus. She came in on the third stop. *And then?* Something was nagging at the back of his mind, but he could not remember.

His wife talked. She told him that his children were longing for him and wanted to see him. She held his hand and he felt her love and her fears. He wanted to say something, but could produce only a crackle.

“Don’t try to talk yet. Wait a day or two. Your throat needs to recover from that tube” – that was the passenger. *Why was she here?*

He managed to talk only two days later. He could not identify his own voice – hoarse and hesitant, but he was glad

he could ask the questions that bothered him. He received no answer for most.

Quite slowly he started to get the picture in his head and it was not pleasant. He had been badly hurt. Nobody would tell him where or how. He had been in intensive care for several weeks before awakening. He was still not totally out of danger, but was improving. He would need a long period of recuperation. He also saw and understood; he had wounds all over, mainly on his chest, but also on his face, on his belly, on his legs and on his arms. Most were superficial, but the chest injury was very serious – it had barely missed the heart, and his belly injury was quite serious as well.

His passenger had been also injured in the same incident, but her wounds were lighter and she had already returned to her work, but she visited him every evening.

His dreams continued to disturb him. Each dream ended with a muffled, threatening noise and then silence and darkness. *This should have told him something! What?*

The first time he managed to sit in his bed he felt dizzy, but he was also happy – he was finally rid of being tied to the bed. His children were allowed to visit him two days later. He hugged them with all his might, disregarding the protest of his wounds.

That night he couldn't sleep due to his pains, and then the dreams came. Before waking up he heard in his dream something else, just before that dreadful noise. Somebody was yelling "Alla achbar!"

He woke up covered in cold sweat. The night nurse came running to make sure he was alright. He asked her to stay awhile and then said, stating rather than asking: "There was a terrorist attack on the bus. I was gravely wounded. The passenger who visits me was also wounded, but much less. What else happened there?"

The nurse tried evading the question. She had no instructions how to handle this situation, but he insisted. She finally told him: “You identified the terrorist as he tried to enter the bus. You pushed that passenger to the floor, probably saving her life, and shoved the terrorist out of the bus while closing the doors. He exploded outside the bus and only a few pieces of shrapnel entered the bus through the slit that was still open. A large piece hit your chest and stopped a millimeter from your heart. Some other passengers were very lightly injured.” She looked at him admiringly. “You acted very bravely. You prevented a severe disaster.”

She stood up, returning to her professional behavior. “You should sleep now. I can give you something to help you sleep if you need it.”

He did not fall asleep at once. He tried to remember more details, but eventually he slept.

His wife was already there when he woke up. “They told me you found out what caused your injuries; that you are a hero.” She hugged him warmly and then held his shoulders and looked into his eyes. “I don’t need you to be a hero. I just want you to be, to live with me and with our children so that we may all be happy together.”

The passenger came in the evening, “Now that you know what happened, I also have a story to tell you. I grew up without a father. When I was small I used to dream that you were my father, pampering me and buying presents for me. When I grew up a little” she blushed somewhat – “I used to dream of you as my man – taking me out, hugging and kissing... I stopped it only after I found some more suitable guys. During that ride” she pointed to his bandages – “I meant to give you something.” She took a decorated envelope from her bag. “This is an invitation to my wedding. I met my intended on your bus. I wanted you to be the first person to get

this invitation, besides our families, but the events happened in a different way than our plan and now you are the last.”

He took the envelope and read the invitation inside it. The wedding was going to be in two weeks. “Are you sure I’ll be able to come?” he asked.

“I talked with the doctors. You will surely not be able to dance at the wedding – it would be quite difficult for me - but you’ll be able to come, and you may even not need a wheelchair by then.”

His wife smiled. She already knew all this, and the doctors had told her that such a glad occasion might even help his recovery. She hugged the passenger and said; “Mazeltov! We are lucky to have him!” and they all hugged.