



# Roadkill

MIRIAM SIVAN

First it was hit then thrown forward. Up and quickly down under the car in front before it rolled under mine. I could feel the body hit the chassis. I heard the impact. Driving north, towards Golan, not knowing where I was going, simply going. The border would stop me soon enough. I had to leave. Just that. What, I wasn't sure, though all these were afterthoughts. The first and only compulsion was to get out, to be other than there. That flat was cannibalizing my pain. A baby's waiting bedroom: unhung curtains, an unassembled crib. Six months of expectant life suffocated by a tumor determined to get me next.



My hands are red with blood. The dog is in my arms. Though no longer alive, at least, I think, technically, she is still bleeding slowly from her mouth, from her skull. She died while I held her, sang to her, and finally closed my fingers over her wind pipe to stop the pain. How quickly she stilled. There is only so much pain that one should be expected to bear. Cars cruise by me. The drive till-you-drop style Israelis don like a dark cloak, vampires all of them. Baring their teeth, they lean hard against the car in front, taking no prisoners, passing recklessly, hounds for blood. There is the unreality of feeling healthy in a world which is propelled towards decay and death. And there is the unreality of being sick in a world buoyed by the lie of life. I watch the drivers. Some listen to music. Some to the inescapable drone of political blather. Days float by, one becoming another, and there is no way to tell them otherwise. I am there, not here, sitting on the side of the road, red bloodied hands folded quietly in my lap now, the carcass of a large brown dog beside me, her blood being drunk by the dry ground. No one pauses to see.

Or so it seems. No one actually stops. No one wants to hear the story of Ella and the dog run over. Or the one about Ella and her unborn boy. There could be lots to tell in the latest chapter of Ella and Gil. But who wants to hear the usual crap about marriage though Ella would like to tell her story. She would like to have someone enclose her in strong arms and assure her — and make her believe — that everything was going to be all right. She would like to try and understand what all right means.

She should stay home another two weeks, above the mandatory six, after such an operation. And if she needs more, hell, that's fine too, she was told over and over. Her boss and colleagues at the factory, so understanding. The surgeon, straining through his callousness, playing at concern. She knows they are all trying to be extra nice because of the baby. To have a uterus and a dead baby taken out at the very same time is the kind of blow which can elicit the best in people. (Whatever that means.. Ella just reads RELIEF on their faces: it's not them.) "And now 6 months of chemotherapy." My voice rises to a quiet croak as I tell the dead dog the forecast. "They hope they got it all, but just to make sure, the poison."

Of course I don't agree with the doctors. I don't necessarily disagree either, but I'm not rushing to having an intravenous drip toxic waters into me, drop by drop, that are not, like anti-missile missiles, sophisticated enough to attack only cancer cells. I watched my father's veins turn black from this stuff. I know all about the headaches, the nausea, the metallic taste in the mouth. Alternatives? Unsure. When I reach the border I might know more.



Ella had never looked so good, everyone, absolutely everyone kept telling her. Not that she wasn't attractive before, but something lit up in her and like the most time-worn cliché about pregnancy, she glowed. Women on the factory floor made dresses for her, deliberately using fabrics that Ella had designed for that season's fashions. Ella and Gil. High powered, fast living, a fashionable Tel Aviv pair. From their back balcony in the right neighborhood they could see a sliver of sea. Concerts, pubs, regular travels to Europe, Asia, and Africa. Everywhere, Ella sketched and collected. Shapes, colors, fabric swatches. The baby would slow them down, of course. But it was time now.

She had married at 30, had had five years of play with Gil. Time had come to give to the future. A child. A namesake. A kaddish. Yet with one flash of the ultrasound screen, Ella had gone from being a forward looking madonna, doyenne of the fashion world, to a woman cloaked in death. A rapid fire transformation. From shifts to shrouds, hue to tonelessness, foresight to oblivion.



When I said to Gil, we were sitting in the hospital waiting room after that last ultrasound, that something was very wrong, that it never took so long to read the images of the baby and that I had never before seen three doctors converge around a printout from one of those machines, he said casu-

ally (to offset the moan that was beginning to rise in me) that no matter what they found out, I'd survive. He's still eating those words.

I begin to laugh out loud and can't stop for a good minute. The cars garble the sound. My arms wrap around my waist. I feel the blood stickiness on my fingers as they hold on to each other. I hope that glibness stays stuck in his throat forever. "Remember the sequence," this time I include the cars in my hearing audience, and scan the approaching headlights for a bright moment. "The doctors come out, we all go into a little cubby with the main man, he says, THE baby is dead, no heartbeat, and there is a tumor the size of a grapefruit lying alongside. They are sharing a bed." Okay, he wasn't so poetic. My words. My body created and killed a baby. Cancer found us both. Him first. I get to sit through another act.

"Gil was green as the doctor's scrubs," I stroke the dog's nuzzle, her black nose is almost dry, "an awful color to use for fabric. Doctor said I needed an immediate hysterectomy followed by chemotherapy. Life expectancy: dependant on how far the cancer's travelled. Been down this road before — eh, what's up Doc? — something they'll see when I'm opened. Great, I say to the all-knowing, not-knowing doctor, I'm free after lunch." I wanted the baby out of me as soon as possible. I couldn't bear not feeling him kick and roll around and for the first time in the week that I noticed this quiet, know why. And with this episode, would end my short tenure as a mother, and possibly as a living being. Gil, when he finally found himself, started to scowl and went and sat in a corner. I didn't move. The doctor came back to tell me that I would have to return in 4 days and to stop by the nurse's station on my way out for the pre-op instructions. Drank lots of vodka and orange juice that night, they're called screwdrivers in the States, and waited for them to bore a hole into me. I felt nothing for a little while then. The next day on a cheerier note

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drank vodka and lemonade. By the third day I was out shopping at the supermarket so Gil would have food in the house while I was in THE hospital. I felt better, which was almost unbelievable and I thought, well I can handle this, and went on, stoic and resigned, I guess, couldn't call it exactly hopeful, until this morning, no it began already yesterday. Out of nowhere, I was folding the laundry, warm from the dryer, and then there was nothing in front of me. No images, no senses, no hope, a vast, or even dense, is that possible, emptiness. I knew I had reached the end of possibility. No matter what the official prognosis, and to inject something upbeat into this dank monologue, they, the all important doctors are hopeful and confident that they have "gotten it all," my life is over. Or, at the very least, this life I've been living is over. So how can I have left what no longer exists?



“Good question.” I stroke the dog’s long thick fur and feel my legs under her head begin to tingle from the “dead weight of her,” I say out loud, as if drunk, my thoughts suddenly transformed into words erupting into the outer world. I thought long and hard about Gil’s gun, the one he straps to his leg during the day. It would have to be at night or on a Saturday when he’s not at work. Easy enough to go into the dead baby’s room to blow my brains out. Messy but efficient. Gil will hire someone to scrub down the walls. But part of me still wants to live, though I can’t say why. I certainly don’t want to hurt anyone else, though sometimes I wish Gil would go away, very, extremely, permanently. He either denies or submits to his pain — either way, there’s no place for me in it. “The anesthesiologist was held up,” I begin to tell the highway the story anyway. Who

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gives a fuck if it’s listening. “The operation was scheduled for 10 and it was already 12 noon. First Gil scolded the nurse who had prepped me, for not getting the department head involved. Then when he found the doctor he hammered at him, his words relentless and cold, for the hospital’s gross insensitivity and mismanagement. And YOU can understand his point of view.” I allow myself a few hand motions to accentuate the narrative. “We had suffered enough already. Delays were unendurable. And the nurse who was replacing my IV bag agreed with him. But, she added, he should keep the anxiety and trouble-shoot-

ing to himself. ‘Out there,’ she spoke firmly and kindly to him, but pointed hard towards the hospital corridor ‘not in here. She’s going through enough. Here you speak softly, tell her everything’ll be all right.’ And she stroked the blanket under which I lay quietly. Gil smiled sheepishly, a little boy reprimanded.” Oh, it was grand.



I had no intention of killing this dog today. I am not that out of control. I saw her from a distance. She was standing by the side of the road, head held high, tail alert, like Lassie scanning the horizon for Timmy. I loved that dog and watched her daily on TV. I longed for one of my own. Not a collie necessarily, but a relationship with a loyal and brave dog. When I saw this large brown dog, standing roadside, an overriding anxiety punched at my gut. I always feel this whenever I see a dog near moving cars. Move away, I said aloud. Don’t come closer. And then she bounded across the two lane highway, hitting the car in front of me and then rolling under mine.



When I was seven, my parents gave in and bought my brother and I our own puppy, a small terrier for Manhattan apartment living. Then too silly and small to know better, Toto ran onto the West Side Highway and into a car as if into the arms of a loving child. My father wouldn’t let us see the broken body when we went to the A.S.P.C.A. on 92nd Street. He identified Toto’s remains and gave me the blue metal tag. My desperate prayers as we rode crosstown to the East River had gone unanswered. There had not been a mistake. Toto was dead. Devastated by this betrayal, though again, not permanently put off, I found myself again praying like hell, begging a phenomenon I had come to call God, to not make this ultrasound reading a tragedy. Unanswered prayers are haunting. The void I hurl my wishes into. Toto. Toto.



I drag the dog's broken body off the shoulder and look for something to dig a grave with. I cannot possibly drive off and leave her to become a diminishing mound of fur and bones in the undignified open. There's already way too much road kill: cats, dogs, foxes, molerats, birds, jackals. I see them daily on my way to work; the slow transformation into dust. The work of the grave displayed. It is taking me a long time with the sharp stone I've chosen for this work, but I don't care. I'm not rushing anywhere. It's already very hot at ten in the morning and I'm panting hard, flushed from exertion, with inertia. The radio announcer may have mentioned a sandstorm from the Sahara. Maybe that's why the day is yellow. I do not hear a car stopping. "I can help you," a voice says to me, and I am surprised at how unsurprised I am. I turn slowly and see a man in an army uniform standing beside his car, trunk popped open, a shovel in his hand.

"Thanks," I say and reach out to take the shovel.

"Rest, and drink some water." He hands me the water bottle in his other hand. "Look how red you are."

I take the water bottle automatically, drink two long sips. Water dribbles down my chin and onto my chest. It cools me a little. I am sweating so much my shirt swaddles me, advertising my distended belly. I sit down in the shade of his car and watch how he methodically digs into the dry earth. With minimal, graceful movements he moves the dirt from the emerging pit to one side. A few moments later, his uniform too is stuck to him and the grave is nearly done. "Here now you rest," I rise and place my hand on the handle of the shovel. I want to finish the job. I need to. But he resists. We look at each other directly for the first time and I see myself vaguely in the reflection of his black eyes. "Please, let me finish. It's important to me." I turn my head slightly, uncomfortable in his steady gaze. But still he resists. I let go, self-conscious and horrified by the image of me in his eyes: mad, flushed frizzy-haired, a sweaty shirt against a swollen form. He wears his stinking shirt so well. He is young and still calm. Eyes like midnight. Hair like cropped wheat. A body that digs graves in minutes, a mouth that could probably kiss some of the pain away.

I turn abruptly and walk towards his car, murmuring. "Desire. And shame." I'm ill. Withering. More than a decade older than this GI Joe. He's the fucking boy scout helping the old woman cross the street. I walk past his car and along the shoulder's edge, afraid the rage in me will erupt and I'll be vicious when he's trying to be kind.

"You want to help fill?" His voice breaks me.

"Certainly," I say, more shame burning me up. Of course he has seen me speaking to myself. I want to cut at the soft patience in his voice. Am I so pathetic and he so the mitzvah-loving Rambo? Am I good deed of the day: helping this wacko bury a dog she ran over? With too much gusto I take the shovel and push dirt in over the dog's body. It doesn't thud the way I expect it to. I start at one side and methodically watch as the back, the tail and then the legs, torso, and finally the head are covered with a thin layer of earth. Humbled, my rage subsides some.

"I still expect a reaction from her, a shaking free, a hell what you think you're doing covering me with dirt yowl, you know what I mean. It's that stillness that's awful." I look at him, I can't help myself, I feel the look, the words, they're coming out, I'm erupting and the lava is scorching.



Where was the baby buried, was it buried, why wouldn't they let me bury him near my father in Jerusalem? Children of the dead, in the Hasidic sections of Jerusalem's cemeteries, are not allowed to stand by the open grave, the man in charge told me and my brother at our father's funeral. So I never got a chance

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to cover him with dirt, tuck him in for a long good night. And I didn't argue. I didn't want to hear the thud I expected to hear when the dirt hit bottom. Enough that I had seen the body being lowered. Which is why they wouldn't let me see the baby. Drugged me and told Gil, too traumatic. But even on my morphine cloud I screamed that I wanted to see him.



"I helped bury my best friend last month," the young man says. I think I see tears rim his eyes. Saccharine clichés molest me. But his eyes do look like dark pools I want to swim in. "He was killed near the Lebanese border on a day when they gave me leave. Just for twenty-four hours. And I was supposed to be with him that day." He stares down at the covered dog.

"I know that supposed to." He takes the shovel from me and in a few deliberate strokes, furious and grievous, finishes with the grave. He throws the shovel into the car and slams the trunk closed.

"Now what?" he asks me.

"What do you mean what?" I can not imagine what more there is.

"We're both soaked, stinking, and I can't just bury a dog with someone and say good-bye."

"Why not?" I say, feeling the lava lap at my mouth and I have to laugh at it. "I just buried a baby and said good-bye to a husband." I begin to laugh harder. I even burst out with laughter. I am not crazy, not yet, and the pain is stalking me. And I can't cry. He looks at me, shocked is it? "You serious? You're not pregnant? So casual about it, God, what's wrong with you then?"

"Hell, I'm going to die. We all are, to let you in on a little secret that was just broadcast to me on my own private cosmic earphones. It's all over so why not, ... who asked you anyway to stop and help and who knows what the fuck you expect from me now and what you think we just did beyond bury an ugly dog that was stupid enough to run into the middle of the road

with tons of metal flying in her direction at 120 kilometers an hour." I want to hit this man, I want to bite him, piss on him, and fuck him. I run into my car and start the engine. He follows, looking like some shit-kicking cop in Mississippi (I have been on too many Southern back roads to resist the temptation of this image). He places his hands on the open window.

"I want you to follow me. I'm going to turn left at the next intersection and then right, towards the beach."

He is missing the mirrored sun glasses, but I see myself when I look at him anyway. He backs away slowly and I notice how the crease in his fatigues is gone, the dark boots dull, the belt on his hips slung a bit too low. When he starts driving, I follow, a metal shard directed by a magnet. We drive in procession, slowly, cautiously, past Nahariya's one light intersection and on to a small road along the beach. He turns off to Achziv and I realize I don't have to continue but do anyway. I pull up next to him in the empty parking area. I don't know what I am doing, but I haven't known that for days already.

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He comes out of the car wearing a clean tee shirt and I can't not notice how beautiful he is. Am I so old to be longing for youth this way? Probably not at thirty-five, but I am bloated like an aged crone, and feel bitter and brittle. Just missing a few warts, the cackle's already begun.

"Let's go to the water," he says taking my elbow and guiding me over the rocks and the sand. I am limp and tense and don't know how else to understand the strain and longing for oblivion engulfing me. The sea is so clear it is unsettling. The sand ripples symmetrically on the bottom. The water takes me and I keep walking. My clothes pull away and fill with water which eddies around me, chilly and light. Not to drown, but to feel my smallness in each wave. I lay on my back and float like my grandmother, lulled by the waves during an acute attack of pain, only her heart broke, the springs popped, and it was over. Mine breaks with each moment, again and again, with every breath. I think of lying her face up to the sun in the water at Gordon beach, in Tel Aviv, the lifeguard watching her morph into inanimation. This is the same water, the same shore line 150 kilometers north. In many other places in the world, this distance wouldn't be the other end of the country, but considered the same beach. And for me, raised with the Eastern Seaboard as a reference, it is the same beach.



My baby died in salt water. My grandmother died in salt water. It is good enough for me. I feel I am drifting quickly and it takes a moment to realize the man is pulling me to shore by my heel. I do not resist. I don't care to live but I can't deny his need to rescue. When I feel the sand against my shoulders, I sit up briefly. The beach is empty, mid-week in May, and like always, is mag-

nificent. The gravelly sand runs up to the Phoenician ruins, that forgotten port of call. At the water line, and for the first time in weeks, I lie on my stomach. He sits beside me. What's there to say? Mercifully he knows this. He begins to untangle my hair, to lift it from my neck where it has become knotted in the thick rubber band. His hands are cool and clever and I wonder if he is a medic. But I won't ask. I don't want to know. Maybe this is my last tango, and no names is a crucial element. No biography. No words, just one body with the other, giving form to pain. Have I already ruined it by telling him about the baby? But I was vague enough about the cancer and didn't mention Gil by name.



I roll over on my back. The man lifts his hands and places them quietly in his lap. "What was your friend's name?" I ask.

"You wouldn't know him," he answers matter of factly. "You're not from here."

I want to protest, but don't have the energy to. I am from here, just not originally. I sat, gas mask ready, in my sealed room during the Gulf War. I say good-bye twice a year to a husband who still has an active reserve duty. I am at the same risk as everyone else that the next bomb will go off near me, on the bus, in a cafe? I was hoping to bring a baby boy into this world, my destiny bound to that of the place.

I watch the cloudless sky move. Bands of blue headed in the same direction. "You know," I sit up, "about the submarines that patrol the coast? Soldiers know things like that." I notice that his dog tags have fallen to the side. I wonder if they are hot like the sand. I want to lift them and do after a moment. Like a blind person my fingertips feel the letters in relief. I will not look at his name. He tugs at my hand and I lay back down beside him. Not touching. Not not touching. I can feel when he begins to cry. Hesitantly, but not quietly. I put my arms around him and despite the anguish suffocating me, know this man, fifteen years my junior, this boy really, still needs to feel there is something worth breathing for. I hold him closer, rock him, and like a puppy he nuzzles his head into my neck. I hold him even tighter and lick tears from the corners of his eyes.

"I'm going to the border," I whisper. "I'm going until I'm stopped."

"Don't stop," he breathes out and covers my mouth with his. I am lost, I am found, I am falling into warmth. He reaches under me and wraps my legs around him. This is not a prelude to penetration. This is bind me, this is shield me. I squeeze as hard as I can, wondering if the periscope of a submarine has us in the viewfinder, and with fingers desperate to enclose, grasp his metal dog tags. I cover his name with my fist and his mouth with mine. His tears don't stop. "Don't stop," I breathe out, "don't stop," and he wets us with loss, we are lost in the salt water of beginnings, of ends. I open my shirt so he can suckle, a mother's son on his way to battle. ■

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