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THE *DEATH* OF URI PELED

a novel

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Asnat decorated the walls of their home in Jerusalem with geraniums and the head of their bed with melia branches and the water jar with cyclamen. She shut the door with a safety look and sealed the windows with the green shutters that were closed from the outside. Then she said, We have everything we need. Three years of marriage had spoiled their fruit and now they celebrated a new flowering. Their bodies glowed and expired without any yesterday or tomorrow, and day and night were discerned only by the pale light that crept in through the cracks. Like an enemy it sneaked in on yellow beams in the morning and neon gleams at night. It was to no avail that their friends knocked on their door to see how they were. Asnat's mischievous finger would play on Uri's lips and quiet his voice that would have given them away. Mintz didn't try to break their door down either. She had told him what she would say to the children when she returned to work in the arts-and-crafts class in Public School Number Five: I was sick, she would say, and I had to stay in bed, why didn't you come and visit me, you naughty little children, you didn't bring a single flower to your sick teacher, you naughty children. Asnat wouldn't smile as she spoke. She would only take out a copper plate and say: Do as I do, children. She told Mintz about everything. One day she would quit her demeaning job and turn to the fine arts. Not those which were refined like silver and filled with gold. But rather a transcendent art which aspired to the infinite heavens. Her eyes glowed as she spoke, said Mintz in the café, in one of those moments of honesty between friends and neighbors. Mintz was emptying the bottles of cold yellow bear which were renewed in turn by the hostess. His eyes swam in the film of intoxication and his mouth murmured: You should know, Uri, that your wife Asnat has a poetic soul, and you're not worth the nail on her little toe, Captain Peled. You just listen to her sometime when she talks about infinity. Mints raised his eyes to a indistinct spot on the yellow curtain that was crowned with cobwebs at the ceiling, and he began reciting: Infinity is like the black fields one views from the height of the water tower in Ein Hasharon; infinity is like Marzevah Valley flowing on to the foothills of Ephraim. Mints spoke well when speaking of Asnat. If you don't go back to your little wife and get your divorce from the army, I'm

going to take her away from you, on my honor as a friend. Mintz was drunk and that was why he boasted, he being Nira's husband and the father of two children and so forth, while Asnat was his, Uri's, from Ein Hasharon till now, when her hands pleased his calm body with the remembered caresses of long ago.

For three days their bodies glowed and expired and kindled again like the flames of candles before dying. They required nothing from outside; everything they needed was with them. Their fingers dug scraps of cold battle rations out of split tins and blood from their cut hands mixed with the oil of canned fish. The air in their room was thick and the water in the jar was murky and the purple cyclamen petals wilted.

At noon Uri got out of bed and said, It's time to go out, Asnat. He felt he had to be outside. Asnat murmured, Where? And he hummed in reply, To the camp, I mean nowhere. She sat up in bed, leaned back on the wall and asked again: Where? And she didn't wait for his answer but was already standing by the door, putting on his long army coat, and her hands smoothed her disheveled hair and her eyes hinted: Let's go. See how easy it is to leave all this. And it seemed to Uri that his days of confinement were like bits of eternity, since he had died and been resurrected in the cave of his bed, and he had stood before no judgment. Freedom was his, and Uri could do with it as he wished.

Asnat regarded him with roguish eyes. The army coat changed her shape, inflating her belly, and he didn't recognize her except for her eyes. Let's go, her lips whispered. Her arms were enveloped in the sleeves of his coat. It was made of rough cloth, his army coat, having been his faithful companion since the time he was a machine gunner in the reconnaissance unit. At nightfall he used to escort the train that came from Chadera and was bound for Lod. From the disemboweled hill of the quarry that overlooked Tul Karem with its hostile glitter of yellow lights he raced in the jeep along the dirt road beside the black tracks approaching the orchards of Kalkiliyah, and he would be wrapped in his coat, gazing at the darkness from which chilly whips lashed at his face, and warmth would flow from the black iron grip of the M.G. machine gun to the fingers of his frozen hands. Even on summer nights he would suddenly put the coat on his naked body, and the rough cloth

would quiet his wild dreams.

Asnat seemed to be waiting for him to open the door and take her with him on his way, and he didn't know his way when he saw Asnat wrapped in his coat. After all, he wouldn't return home to the army camp before his leave was up. Perhaps he would go out to Nachalat Chesid where the remembrance of his father remained unchanged, even though his father, Rabbi Yaakov the son of Rabbi Avraham, the Principal of the Pszczelno Rabbinical Academy, had never settled there.

Having decided all at once, he put on his uniform. Now he felt more sure of himself. He pushed the door open with his shoulder and drew Asnat after him. They saw themselves pelted with grayish light, and a chilly wind blew at their backs. They linked their fingers and Uri sensed that it was good, it was good, it was the birthday of their son Yaakov the son of Peled.

Children returned from their places of study, engrossed in one another, jostling their brief cases, swirling about for it was good, it was good, it was the birthday of freedom. They hushed as they saw the couple clinging in the green army coat. It was clear from their faces that they were full of indignation at these grown-ups feasting on one another and exploring one another with their hands, undaunted by the battalion of tiny tots galloping down the slope and taking the street by storm --- for we are the conquerors, they threatened with their brief cases. The couple was pinned to the wall till the children's charge had passed. Asnat's body relaxed beneath the touch of Uri's warm fingers.

They went on down feeling their way like the blind, and they came to a broken iron gate that blocked their way with a wall that cried: Shameful harlots and tarts clad like wild breasts keep away and do not contaminate our air. The shuttered store opposite them announced that it was closed as a sign of mourning over the sinful government in the Holy Land, and lecherous eyes of black letters cast their warning from the cornice: Daughter of Israel, remember that the Law requires you to dress modestly.

He automatically shielded his wife in his big arms. She looked up at him with her rain-washed eyes as if requesting, Let's go back, Uri, I'm scared. But his eyes yearned to be where the children had vanished.

"Did you see their brief cases?" he whispered to her fair hair that gathered at his chest, "and their

long side locks, as if there'd never been a world war." He snickered in his throat in confusion. He raised his face and smelled the air. "That's Mama's smell. She waiting for them with hot bean soup...."

"It's time you grew up, Uri," Asnat threatened him with a finger, as they pushed on over the broad street from which voices sprouted calling one to prayer and to buy vegetables today only very cheap.

Uri put his mouth to his wife's hair and read from the opposite wall: "By order of the esteemed Rabbis of this Holy City may it be speedily rebuilt we call upon the women and daughters of Israel in view of the lewdness and insolence and corrupt...."

"Let's go back, Uri," pleaded Asnat, "after all, we're husband and wife. Let's go back all by ourselves without any prohibitions...."

A boy with clipped hair and curly side locks, walking backward and counting the store entrances, was caught between them where he twitched a minute like a shot bird. Uri moved his hand across the satin prayer cap with Jerusalem embroidered on it and blurted: "Is Mama at home?" The boy butted between their bodies as if diving into water and ran off, shouting a curse.

"It's time you grew up," said Asnat in a hard voice. "Let's go back." She didn't let go of his arm. He freed his aching arm, and Asnat begged his forgiveness as if she knew her sin. He tried to appease her and only added to her distress:

"You were never a mother."

"That's your fault," she snapped; "I don't want a professional soldier's son."

"I'm strong there," he blurted mechanically. His eyes followed a flock of girls in long brown socks. They darted all at once out on a bend in the lane and swept up the slope, chattering merrily.

"Maybe you recognized Anita among them?" Asnat teased him. He fixed hard eyes on her and she bent her head. "You hate me," she said faintly. He tried to object but she went on: "I'm not to blame for her death or for the death of your father and mother over there."

"Of course you're not to blame for their death, dear," he kissed her on her high white forehead.

“The kiss of Cain,” she was unappeased.

“No one is to blame for their death, dear,” he said in a voice not his own; “that’s why I’m staying in the army.”

“You promised,” she removed her hand from his arm and blocked his way.

“Let’s go back,” he tried to circumvent her, “it’s cold here.”

“You promised,” she was pulled along, her upper arm in the vise of his fingers; “you promised you wouldn’t sign up again,” she demanded, gasping. With her free hand she tried unsuccessfully, to shield her face from the redoubled lashes of rain.

They took shelter from the rain in an arched gateway. A familiar chant of distant days ascended from somewhere. “You promised,” she began again, but his hand sealed her lips. His finger delved between her lips as if seeking to crush her tongue. Drops of blood rose on his finger as he withdrew it. His lips smiled at her angry eyes.

“Good news for all,” they heard a boy’s high voice. They saw him enfolded in the coat of an old man wearing a wide-brimmed hat. “Three ancient books have appeared,” the boy went on calling in the old man’s ear; “The Great Men of Israel The House of Shlomo The Rif’s Commentaries by the righteous sage....”

“Let’s go,” Asnat put her tongue on Uri’s injured finger.

“Rabbi Shlomo Ellstein of Pultusk, may his righteous memory be blessed, a disciple of the Rabbi of Radzymin,” the high voice went on behind them.

“You shouldn’t put your finger where it shouldn’t be,” Asnat tried to drown out the boy’s voice. Her rosy face and disheveled hair shook in winsome negation. Her loosening coat revealed the damp path of her breasts and once again she was the Asnat of the days before their marriage and quarrels, and Uri had never tasted her as he was about to now in the home to which they were returning from every path of Nachal at Chesid.

“Rabbi Shlomo Ellstein may his righteous memory be blessed,” he thought out loud, once the storm

of their blood had calmed in the white bed.

“What’s gotten into you?” giggled Asnat.

“Nothing,” he also smiled.

“When are you going to tell them about your discharge?” She rolled over on her back, full of sleep.

“And if I don’t tell them?” He didn’t look at her. “They want me there.”

Asnat caught her breath as if trying to remove every distraction before replying. Only the raindrops tapped softly on the rotting wooden shutter. Slowly, in a half-jesting voice, she said: “There isn’t going to be any Rabbi Shlomo Ellstein.”

“You wouldn’t do it again!” He turned and gripped her naked shoulders.

“Everyone is the master of his own body, that’s what you always said,” her voice was hard.

He eyed her body whose curves were outlined by the thin blanket and fixed his glance on her belly: “You can’t do that again. Why, it’s murder!” Asnat kept still. He wanted to break the silence and shatter the tone of intimacy: “You’ve been seeing Mintz.”

“Is that what’s bothering you? Well, we’re neighbors.”

“Neighbors,” he breathed.

“Aren’t you friends?” she feigned astonishment. “You really love him, you said, because he loves Jerusalem, you said, a fifth generation....”

Uri never took his eyes off her face with its closed lashes. In their three years of marriage he had not come to know her. Each of her faces was a mask covering up the one before. Perhaps it was because his days and nights were spent in the field, among his soldiers whom he knew by name and personal history and private problems and even by the features beneath their helmets. He knew their hesitating eyes, gazing at him on campfire nights and waiting for their commander to break out of his angry silence. You’re going to be soldiers for me and not spoon-fed kids, he roared at them again in the face of their mute protests, soldiers and not spoiled students whose mamas stuff them with cheese sandwiches --- I never was a student and it doesn’t matter why, you understand? They

listened to him reverently and he drove them hard on marches with heavy packs, prodding the stragglers with his long, unrelenting steps. With Asnat he found release from the burden of his silences, and he would tell her of his love for his soldiers. His love for their united mass streaming in the evening back to the bivouac, his love for the rattle of their mess kits as they went to supper, the roar of their charge with bayonets fixed and rifles firing, their unceasing advance on the hill burnt with napalm and battered by the bullets of planes that shrieked by just ahead of them the impassioned voice of the battalion commander calling over the communications set: Go on, Uri, go on, Uri, don't let them pick their heads up, go on, Uri, keep up the running fire, I love you, Uri, fire....

"Mintz comes to see you all the time," Uri stated.

"No," she said, "sometimes."

"Sometimes." He mimicked her voice and wanted to scream: But what does he do, what does he do with you!

"You asked me and I told you," she said in a hurt tone.

"You keep meeting him," he would not relent. That's the way they are. All of them. All women. Like the one in the alley by the sea. He fixed an offended look on Asnat. She too might be mocking him like the one who had lain on the faded bed while he stood with his head lowered, humiliated in the shame of his desire. Later he hated her for having spoken to him as if he weren't Uri Peled who was in training for commando duty in a regiment famed for its tradition of grueling desert battles. His belt from which he had removed the shoulder straps, fastening its polished buckle to his waist so that he might partake of its glorious splendor, squirmed ashamedly in his shaking fingers. He secretly cursed the smooth-faced oily-haired young man who had suddenly blocked his way in the dark lane where he had strayed like an abandoned dog. Want a girl? He had asked, just like that, as if he were hawking an evening paper, as if Uri had not dreamed of her curved woman's body during the long nights on watch, when the wall of his pain was answered by a distant chorus of jackals. Want a girl? The fellow wouldn't let him alone, probably contemptuous of him at such an early hour, with the night of his leave stretching eternally before him till the minute he would catch the



G.M.C. headed back to camp. He would huddle up in a corner in the back of the truck and tell nothing of his stroll by the beach that teemed with happy couples jeering at him. Tales of heroism would circulate among the returning troops seated in the truck as it clattered over the bumpy roads, and they would speak out loud of how Clark Gable had gotten the better of his black-hatted pursuers and Humphrey Bogart had never missed with his two long-barreled Colts. They would even speak in knowing praise of Marilyn Monroe's golden body beneath the spray of Niagara Falls. Only Uri would be silent.

He was still following him, obstinately, with his high taunting voice: Want a girl? And Uri was alone in the dark alley, whose pale illumination emerged from the café. The voices of grappling men and the click of backgammon dice mingled with the darkness, and Uri was unafraid. He was every inch a soldier, having just completed his basic training with the combat regiment whose insignia displayed thorny cactuses and the sun dawning over blazing sands. With a single blow of his callused hand, trained to whip a rifle around as required by the manual of arms, he could have snuffed out the fellow in mid-stride. Where is she? He asked in a loud, confident voice, with concerned unconcern, and he clenched his hands in his pockets till they ached, and there was a lump in his throat of joy and fear as on his first time at target practice, when the live glittering bullets were put down beside him and he was about to load them and ram them right into the breech like an old campaigner, for what was there to be afraid of anyway, you only had to hold the rifle with its sights up straight. He felt something pulling at his sleeve, stopped in surprise and threw a punch. His hand landed in mid-air but he heard a whisper beside him: Here she is, standing there, just for you, friend. And Uri looked back and saw a woman with kinky black hair, a woman with a curvaceous body whose colorful skirt shimmered in the yellowish light of the café. He turned to her and she smiled at him like an old friend, as Asnat would upon seeing him in his uniform and beret and regimental insignia and service badge. And he said to himself, It's so simple, and you didn't have the courage go up to Asnat and say How are you, Asnat, because she was the daughter of Barzilai, the manager of the citrus groves, and Barzilai was an old-timer, at home in the kibbutz, and you were an uninvited guest sent by the Youth Immigration Agency, a refugee who had yet to prove

his identity as an Israeli. And what was he to do with his uniform and beret when he went home on his first furlough, with the bare walls of his cabin smelling of anti-bedbug spray. He wouldn't dare say to Asnat the daughter of Barzilai the citrus manager, How are you, Asnat....

Let's go, she said like an old hand at such things, and she waved her purse at the alley, and she had the wide-awake body of the woman he'd envisioned on the clear desert nights at the end of summer training, by the flickering candlelight in his cramped pup tent. His eyes were ashamed to look at her spike-heeled shoes tapping and drowning out his pounding heart. All at once she stopped by a dark opening, a cross between a grate and a door. The young man's dark hand reached out to his face. Uri silently filled it with the money he had saved by not smoking and by selling his PX discount coupons and giving up his noon breaks in the canteen. Now the bills dropped, creased, from his damp hand into the young man's, who unfolded them and smoothed their engraved blue fisherman as if he were disrobing their former master.

In the musty hall he stepped along behind the girl who led the way in her tight skirt, and he realized in astonishment that now she was his and he had the right to feast his hungry fingers on her shapely form. He even reached out to her body on the sly, but her hand, landing on his arm, filled him with dread. In the narrow room a yellow light shone under a filthy lamp shade. His eyes stole over to the narrow faded bed and flinched in aversion beneath their lids. In his heart he cursed this adventure which he'd gotten into by mistake, since he had only wanted to see something of Yafo's alleys by night. Asnat's friends had girls waiting for them whenever they came home, as they would relate on sleepy Sundays, and only Uri was on the outside tainting himself with purchased love which many water would not wash away, and how was he to go to Asnat and tell her....

He stood with his hands dangling and his eyes gaping at the brown wooden screen, behind which rustles and swishing sounds were heard. He plucked up courage and asked in a strangled voice: No one can see us? She replied dryly: Get undressed. And she was already unzipping her skirt. Naked, she stretched out on the bed, on the rough coverlet. With the whip of her scornful look on his back he stripped and sat down on the edge of the bed, as one condemned. Come on, her warm hand went out to his trembling back, I'll be good to you, you just pay me an extra something without his

knowing, you won't be sorry, soldier.... Then she did things to his body as if it were hers and she was never his even when she moaned beneath the burden of his love. As if ashamed of her moan she ordered him in her usual tone to get dressed. He obeyed mechanically and waited for some disaster to happen to him, as in the days of his distant childhood when he would smoke in secret on the Sabbath. She put on her clothes and when she turned to the dressing table to take her purse which lay by the lamp shade, she looked up at him with dull astonished eyes, as if asking what he was doing there.

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"Sometimes, when Mintz comes over, we sit and talk," said Asnat and stared at nothing.

"You talk," the venom seeped from his throat.

"Yes, we talk."

"And what, for example, do you talk about?" He drew out the words slowly, while in his heart he wanted to call a halt to his interrogation and shut his ears to her answers.

"All sorts of things."

"For example?"

"Art."

"And what do you do with him afterwards?"

"Don't be vulgar."

"You slept with him."

"I told you I didn't."

"Then what were you doing on Monday till three o'clock in the morning?"

"We were talking about art."

"And afterwards?"

"We said good night."

"With a kiss."

“No, we just shook hands.”

“But if he’d asked you would have slept with him.”

“He didn’t ask. He’s your friend.”

“But what if he asked you, as a friend!” he shouted.

“He’s an interesting person,” she said sadly.

“You would have invited him into bed with you.”

“Don’t be stupid,” she said in disgust as she pulled her clothes on, “he’s got a wife. He sleeps with his wife before coming to see me, he says. To kill temptation, he says. He doesn’t want to hurt a friend. Just Platonic conversation, he says.” She looked about for her stockings and her voice from below was strangled, angry, and her broad bottom reaffirmed his impotence. “You never had time for me. No consideration for my feelings. No interest in what I do when you’re away and what I think about when you’re here,” she crawled on all fours, her hands groping beneath the bed and her face hidden in her hair. “Damn stockings. They’re always disappearing. Do your all for the army. The people for the army. The army for the people. And at home you can behave like a beast,” she straightened, smoothed her skirt on her body, sat on the edge of the bed and began drawing a stocking up her leg. He eyes were fixed on her fingers as she spoke: “You come like a hungry rooster. You get yours. And you leave me there. In the middle. You fall asleep right away. Because the next day you have to begin a new phase of training. And today you returned from the field, and yesterday there was an alert, and the day before yesterday you were officer of the day, and before that a soldier was wounded during training --- and I’m always in the middle. Between the day before yesterday and the day after tomorrow. And in the meantime. What do I do in the meantime. I lie there drowsing by myself. I hate myself in the morning. And I hate you even more.” She crept back in, clothed, beneath the white coverlet, and her look was fixed on his reddening face: “I want you here every night. I don’t need Mintz. I want to be with you, Uri. With you, with you. Every night. We’ll put him to sleep together, Rami or Yaakov, if it’s Yaakov you want. We’ll go to the movies together. We’ll read books together. Even those Von Clausewitz books of yours. But we’ll go to bed together. Every night. And we’ll take our time. We’ll have the whole night, because the

next day you won't go back to that army of yours. And I'll be yours the whole night long. Not in a dream. And you won't hurry. You'll have patience with me. And you'll kiss me all over wherever I want and we'll be all by ourselves, Uri. And when Rami cries at night, you, you will get up to quiet him, you'll be naked when you go to him and I'll look at you as you go and as you come back to me freezing with cold, and you and I and both of us together, oh, Uri, Uri, what am I asking for anyway...."

Uri buried his face in her breast as if trying to flee from her voice to her body. Her words lashed out at his nakedness. He sensed a dull ache and a fear of what was to come. If everything could only be as before, on Friday, at the hour of sunset on the Sabbath eve. He parked the dirty jeep by their window. He blew the horn twice to announce his arrival. And Asnat was already in his arms. The steaming water flowed merrily into the white bathtub. His underclothes were folded on the shelf, as in the laundry at Ein Hasharon. And Mintz and his wife came over for coffee. And later, in the evening, they went over to the Mintzes. Unseen threads tied him to Mintz, a fifth-generation native of this land. He had wanted to flee him together with Asnat, and he couldn't. Perhaps it was because Mintz resembled Barzilai. And there were always new records to be heard at the Mintzes. Uri and Asnat's house was silent even when they were both at home. Uri hadn't heeded his wife's warning: We won't have children till you get a divorce from the army and marry me. He had only laughed, joked. Till one day he found her lying there, her face pale and her eyes closed. In the evening she pushed his body away. He made a bed for himself on the sofa, and he asked nothing since this was a woman's business and he had never been used to such. When he returned after a week of training she told him she had spent all that time in bed, and she informed him of what the gynecologist had done to her body. Uri did not protest. Seeing that she was the master of her body. It was only at night that he would breathe into the dark, You murdered him, and a faint echo would respond, Because of you. You murdered him.

The wind blew through the cracks and seemed to drive raindrops in from outside. He moved close to his wife. Her warmth entered him in comforting streams. Perhaps she hadn't meant all those things she'd said. After all, he'd never been aware of them in her heart. Now she had him. She knew

how he longed for a son, so she attacked him from behind. He lay there a minute submissively, trying to picture the faces of his soldiers and fellow officers as he told them: "I'm through with the army."

"I'm through with them," Uri whispered, and he felt his wife's body yielding in his hands, abandoning itself to the mercy of his fingers, and he would have his revenge on her. "The children in Nachalat Chesid wear their side locks long," he murmured.

"You're hurting me," moaned Asnat.

"Even if they ask me, I won't go back again," he whispered through clenched teeth.

"Uri, Uri," groaned Asnat.

"The children in Nachalat Chesid have fine brief cases," he said to her face.

"You're lacerating me," pleaded Asnat and her hands pushed his shoulders away and he felt nothing. "You bum," she clasped his shoulders and breathed her warmth into his ear. "You'll never leave me again. Do you hear... do you hear...."

However the next day, upon returning to his battalion, he tried to postpone the punishment. He requested a transfer to the War College, and it was granted. From there he would be able to come home even on weekday nights, he promised. Asnat said nothing, and he regarded her silence as a sign of assent.

It was only a year later that she reminded him of her vow with a touch of her belly.