

It Went Like This

Omer Berkman

When it finally happened, it went like this: a moment before he knocked on the door, his head leaning close to the peephole, he thought about the off-road bike ride they took together. He was over the moon just to be outside with her, riding together. He was giddy like a teenager—but she was so slow. He wanted to show her a few places he liked, but at her pace, they weren't going to make it. Was she slowing down deliberately? Was she trying to rile him up? When he asked her why she was riding so slowly she complained that the back wheel was rubbing against the frame. He had borrowed the bike from a friend and knew that it wasn't in good condition. No problem, he said and got off his bike. She stopped too but stayed sitting. She stayed on the bike even when he leaned over the back wheel. Spotting the loosened spring right away, he saw that it has pushed the suspension fork out of place, causing one of the brake pads to stop the wheel. He bent over further to fix it when he noticed how close that brought him to her backside. He drew closer and sniffed. Startled by this animalistic impulse, he quickly stood up and said it was fine. Let's keep going, ok? He rushed her, it might sort itself out. Come on, let's go. Is this *The Amazing Race*? She asked after a while. Do we have to get to every spot, or can we stop and rest for a while?

When she finally opened the door, he'd been standing there for longer than a minute. He wondered what it meant that she was taking so long, whether she was trying to rile him up again. Or was he reading too much into this? Was he important to her, what was she feeling, and basically what was going through her mind? He entered and shot her a quizzical look, but when she closed the door behind him and turned the key in the lock, a calmness settled over him, as if they had entered a protective bubble. The echo in the room was like soft emptiness settling around the two of them. He ran his fingers along the wooden sideboard. She stood in front of him, smiling, and he wondered again what was she doing while he had been waiting outside, did she get dressed or put on make-up or perfume? He couldn't smell anything particular. He wasn't sure what was the intention behind her smile, but he noticed how beautiful her teeth were, white and straight, which he hadn't noticed before. Instinctively, he closed his own mouth, hiding a set of teeth he was never proud of.

Not knowing whether he was the one to make a move, or if he had frozen up, he suddenly found himself very close to her. He couldn't think at all anymore, not even stop to consider whether her eyes were inviting. It was beyond his control. He was pulled towards her and aimed

for the neck. It was she who at the last second turned her head so that part of her lips touched his. The second kiss was better aligned. Then they stopped. They both wanted to rest for a minute. She made herself a large cappuccino with three sugars and a weak black coffee with no sugar for him. The coffee didn't erase the taste of her lips. They didn't want to get carried away in uncontrollable passion like in the movies. They preferred to be level-headed, even calculated. They wanted to feel comfortable with the whole thing, and, as much as was possible, stay in control. That was how it happened.

Or maybe it went like this: In his dream, she was lying on her back in the soft grass, eyes closed, arms stretched over her head, nipples pushing through a green T-shirt that said Free Love. He lay down beside her and slipped the palm of his hand under her neck. He brought his face close to hers and started kissing her but then she turned into his wife, who was pleasantly surprised by his passion. He recoiled. Then his wife disappeared, becoming her once more. He tried again to kiss her and again the kiss turned her into his wife. He didn't try a third time. He woke up feeling horribly empty. His dreams have become so obvious, so pathetic. His sleeping wife lay beside him but he knew that if he tried now she would never respond like in the dream. He didn't try.

In the morning he stopped by the supermarket and bought a bottle of wine and some chocolates. He put the bag in the back seat, started the car, pressed the gas pedal, crossed three intersections without stopping once—a green traffic light waiting for him in each one, and parked in front of her house, taking a moment to look at it, as if he had just found something important that was lost a long time ago. A moment before knocking, with his head leaning close to the peephole, he remembered the first note she had left him, a few months before, with her name and phone number. So much had happened since then. His world had turned upside down. And still, he was hesitant to knock.

It took her less than ten seconds to answer the door. He was counting. She was already dressed in comfortable clothes, her expression was inviting, and she fluttered a kiss on his cheek. He came in, and she quickly locked the door behind him, like a child trying to keep a bird who has accidentally flown in from flying out again, not knowing how sad and cruel it would be when the bird does everything in its power to get out. He handed her the shopping bag and she looked inside and smiled. Then she lifted her head and said that maybe they should release the sexual tension now, right off the bat, because afterwards things can be easier and more relaxed. His voice

quivered slightly when he replied that he would love to, but he needed her help. It's been so many years, he said, I have no idea where to start. She laughed and said, that yes, it can be embarrassing at first, but once we'll get into it, she said, just go with the flow. The more easy-going she seemed, the more he felt like an exhausted wrestler.

They made coffee first—a large cappuccino with three sugars for her and a weak black coffee with no sugar for him—and sat in the living room, shoulder to shoulder, like teenagers at a party at someone's parent-free house. He asked himself about afterwards, if it really would be easier and be more relaxed, would they find a beginning, or would they discover that sexual tension was all there was between them? Would there be any lasting thrill? Would they still find each other interesting? He worried. She saw he was thinking too much and showed him how to start. It was, like she said, embarrassing at first. With the first touch, he was reminded of his dream but then forgot about it completely and allowed himself to go with the flow. That was how it happened.

Or maybe it went like this: They had booked a day off together and sat in a café on the beach. They arranged to meet in a different town, where they would feel anonymous, relaxed, and, perhaps, more vulnerable. Like tourists in a faraway beach town. They ordered coffee, a large cappuccino with three sugars for her, and a weak black coffee with no sugar for him. He felt a shiver go through him, and couldn't tell if it was because of the waves crashing against the rocks right in front of him, or because of her. Every fifteen minutes he had to use the bathroom, and the waitress smiled at him with pity. He looked at the waitress on his way back to the table. She was going from one table to another, gathering orders. He thought his metaphor was beautiful—to gather orders, like a shepherd whose flock scattered across the hills. He thought that the waitress was beautiful, and young, and wanted her to see him differently. He wanted to arouse her envy, not her pity. He wanted to feel like a winner for once.

As he sat down, he wondered if she noticed he was looking at the waitress, and if she did, what went through her mind. His life had become so frustrating, and the pressure of it all forced him to look at every woman. Nothing is forcing you, he reminded himself. Grow up.

If you haven't cheated so far, you probably don't really want to, she said. He raised his shoulders and stopped himself from saying that he does, he really wants to. I don't know, he finally said. We're cheating already, we just haven't made it a reality yet. But it's real, she said, not looking at him. You're one of those men who're scared that the wife and children won't manage without him. Oh, they'll manage just fine without me, he said, that's what's scary. In fact, he said, if I

haven't cheated till now, it's because of you. He thought he saw a spark dance in her eyes for a second, but maybe he only imagined it. What I wish for, he said, is to have another chance in life to be excited by a woman's body. That I have a chance to do something with all this passion I hold inside. To love and be loved. It isn't natural to give it up. And what do you wish for her? She asked. Other things, he laughed but something inside him squeezed with pain. Then he turned serious and asked, Do you really want to talk about her right now? And she looked away from him again. The young waitress walked away from them in a deliberate step, her gait suggesting either envy or disgust.

Theoretically, he asked, would you accept or reject my offer? But she only smiled and now this shiver took over his hands too, and his legs felt weak. And realistically? He kept asking. This passiveness is so convenient for you, she sighed. I am not like a gift to be handed over to you. You want something? Go get it, she said. And he leaned over and kissed her.

Part of it happened on that beach: They walked towards the water, and then continued to the nearest hotel they could find. He paid for a night, but at 3:30 pm they had to leave to pick up their kids. His kids. Her kids. She dropped him off at the train station and they went back to their other lives. That was how it happened.

When everyone else was asleep, he sat on the balcony, remembering the way they had looked at each other. It happened by chance, but once it did, neither of them wanted to disconnect the gaze. They looked straight at each other, and a message went through, an intimacy sprouted. He thought up a fourth option of how it could happen but decided for now to stick to three.