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Cinderella

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Translated from [Hebrew](#) by [Vivian Eden](#)

Herzl Haliwa lets out a scream and jerks his head from the pillow in alarm. He comes to his senses very quickly—this had happened before—and lies still, gently inhaling and exhaling. Trying to quiet his thumping heart, he lets the body lying beside him twist a bit and return to the deep sleep of early morning. After making sure that the person—Anna von Something, he couldn't remember at the moment—has drifted back into slumber, he slowly rises from the bed. He pulls on his trousers as though he were putting on pantyhose—slowly, patiently, noiselessly, first the right leg, and then the left—and holds the metal belt buckle so it doesn't clank. He refrains from zipping up his pants. After buckling his belt, he dons his shirt and picks his shoes up off the floor. He tiptoes to the door, gently turns the handle, takes a last look at Whatsername, the pretty volunteer from Germany, and leaves the room.

It is still early and the corridor of the hostel is empty, as he imagined it would be. When he is at a safe distance from the room, he puts on his shoes, zips up his pants, buttons his shirt, and goes down to the lobby. The reception clerk is the same one who had met him a few hours earlier when he had arrived together with the von Something. He walks past the clerk, who smiles graciously and greets him in English: "Good morning, sir." Nothing in the clerk's behavior is reminiscent of the hostility that he had greeted Herzl with when he checked in. With a suspicious look, the clerk had addressed him in Arabic and forcefully demanded payment in advance for the night. He doesn't recognize him now, and thinks he's maybe a local, maybe a tourist. And this does not surprise Haliwa at all. "Good morning to you, too," replies Haliwa in English, swallowing the words so as not to reveal his accent, and steps out of the hostel into the alleys of Jerusalem's Old City, its Jewish quarter.

The sun has only begun to rise, and the light outside is bluish. A chill grips him and sends a shiver down his spine. He rubs his hands together and walks quickly, trying to remember the shortest way out of this place, which all of a sudden seems threatening to him.

He has no idea where he is going. Yet last night he had been an experienced local who led the German visitor from the pub in Sheikh Jarrah, in the safety of East Jerusalem—Arab territory—to the hostel in the Old City. He tries his luck, reminding himself that he should walk westward, away from the sunrise, and that he should look for the wider lanes, which are safer. It is still early on a Friday morning, but the sounds of the day's first stirrings reach his ears even from the hidden courtyards behind antique doors. Smokers' first throat clearings, crying babies, water flushing down toilets. He quickens his pace. He needs to get out of here before anyone notices him. He tries in vain to summon up even a little of the confidence that he felt when he came in here. Now he hesitates and decides to turn right.

He is almost running. Some of the shops are open and he speeds past them. These are mostly bakeries, and the warm fragrance beats against his nostrils. Noises come from

behind him. Frightened, he glances back to discover a group of black-clad yeshiva students walking fast, but not as fast as he is. He has to get away from them. In the end, he is an easy target. He does not want to get hurt. He sees an exit out of the Old City.

Running will just arouse suspicion, so he walks fast, hoping that the Jaffa Gate is the one in front of him. In any case he walks quickly in that direction, to that large gate, to that opening, out of here.

What a relief. He walks slowly, relaxed, knowing that the Israeli Border Police are there behind him. He is the only person leaving the Old City at this time of day of whom the policeman don't even think of asking personal details. He can now recall last night's conquest. He pulls the pack of cigarettes out of his pants pocket and lights one. The morning's first long drag fills his lungs. He smiles with pleasure, even though he really can't stand the taste of the Imperial anymore.

How jolly it is to walk down Ussishkin, his street. The weekend newspaper is no doubt waiting for him outside his apartment. He skips up the steps two by two, then stops dead in his tracks. Noga is sitting there, her back leaning on the apartment door. She looks at him, her eyes red and swollen. All the joy in his heart dissipates instantly. "Hey," he says, bending down to stroke her hair, and she angrily brushes his hand away. "Don't touch me, you bastard," she says, and stands up.

"Hey," he says in a caressing tone. "I can explain." She'd probably been sitting there the whole night, just waiting to prove something. She gets up and leaves, in tears. She mutters, "Bastard, you bastard." He runs down the stairs after her, trying to grab her arm but she fends him off all the way down. "Hey Noga, you know that I love you," he says and she runs out of the building.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. He really does love her. Only her. It's been two years now that they've been together. They met as interns at a law firm and all the staff there, especially the secretaries, knew from the very first moment that they were meant for each other. And it's true. He can't give her up. He'd do anything for her. He runs after her to the car, insisting that he loves her. "You bastard," she says as she gets into the car. "Can you tell me where you've been until now?" Haliwa says nothing. She locks the car door and drives away.

He will have to tell her the truth. After two years together the time has come: she should know. But is there any chance that she will believe him? He gets into bed, his head in a tailspin. That was a lot of arak¹ he drank last night, and before that he had drunk a bottle of wine at dinner with Noga. He knows he shouldn't mix his drinks. But after midnight he is incapable of drinking anything but arak. He has a splitting headache. He knows that he won't manage to sleep a wink. So what exactly will he tell her, what will he tell her? Of course, the truth and nothing but the truth, but where exactly should he begin? Maybe in the here-and-now, at the end, that, in fact, he turns into an Arab after midnight, exactly like Cinderella. Well, not exactly, but the point is clear. Yes, and Noga will believe this story right away; she's completely gullible.

Or maybe rather from the beginning, from that Rosh Hashanah thirty-odd years ago, when he was born. And maybe even the previous Rosh Hashanah, the one before the war. He'll

start with how his mother, that pious and childless woman, about forty at the time, who was hoping for a child. Praying at the Western Wall, one of the landmarks that religious Jews revere most, she begged God for a son, even if he was born half Arab. What is he going to tell Noga—that his mother's prayer was answered and every night at midnight he turns into an Arab? What are the chances that she will believe him? And if she believes him, what are the chances that she will keep loving him after she knows? After all, he has concealed this from her because his love for her is so strong. He fears that she would leave him if she knew.

At midnight he changes completely. He can't explain it. You have to be there to understand it. But he knows for sure that at midnight he turns into a different person, with different feelings, different fears and different hopes. The only really obvious change is in the language. From midnight to sunrise he hardly knows a word of Hebrew, apart from "okay," "shekel" and "roadblock," because the Arabs also use these words as if they were their own.

A cruel buzzing sows in his ears. Every five minutes he calls Noga's number, knowing in advance that there will be no answer. He will have to go to her place. But what will he say, how will he answer her simple question: "Can you tell me where you were all night?" After all, they've been going out for two years, and they've never spent the night together. For two years they have been together all day, loving at full strength, but he always finds an excuse to evade, to flee, to disappear before midnight.

He certainly is not going to tell her that he had spent the night in the company of a pro-Palestinian German tourist, a woman whose name he has already forgotten. He will not tell her about what usually happens when he becomes an Arab and meets with his friends from the movement to plan protest movements and actions against the occupation. His greatest desire between midnight and sunrise is to meet an Arab girl, and he entirely forgets his love for Noga, but Arab girls aren't to be found after midnight. In the rare cases when he has any success at all, he has to make do with European volunteers who are hot for his political views.

He doesn't become any old Arab, but a proud artist who refuses to go to West Jerusalem, Jewish terrain, because he is not prepared to suffer the humiliation and the selection entering it requires. Obviously, the change isn't physical, but he knows very well that he turns into a different person. They recognize it too, he's sure. Before sunrise, Israeli Border Police often stop him on his way back to Ussishkin. It's something else, maybe a smell, maybe fear. Between midnight and sunrise more glances are sent his way. He knows and feels it. He feels looks of hatred and he is gripped by a sense of persecution.

But he loves Noga. There's no comparison between her and all those meaningless foreign girls that cross his path once every few months. He isn't prepared to give her up, not now. He has to tell her. She'll understand, he's sure. He tries to call her once again, in vain.

That evening he walks to her house. Her flatmate opens the door. Noga is lying face down on her bed, her head buried in the pillow and covered with the blanket. Leonard Cohen is singing loudly. Haliwa turns down the music a bit and sits down next to her on the bed. Noga clutches the blanket and pulls it more tightly around her head. "The time has come for you to hear the truth," he says, stroking the blanket where, he assumes, her head is.

"Listen," he begins. "First of all I want you know that I love you. Only you. And I've come here to give you the explanation you deserve. I know this will sound ridiculous to you, but in fact, I'm half-Arab." As he speaks these last words he sees her body tremble, and he guesses that he was making her laugh. How he loves her, remembering how his sense of humor had always drawn her to him. She never gave up on him even though being together for two years and never spending even a single night together isn't easy. He tells her about the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, about his mother and her praying. He tells her about his childhood, about the nights when he would wake up frightened, feeling something different, knowing that he had dreamt in a different language, one that he only understood at night and completely forgot by morning. He tells her how his mother papered over his feelings, selling him various strange stories. She took him to rabbis, witch doctors and even Arab clerics to expunge the Evil Eye from him. Nothing helped. Dreams of expulsion, war and refugee living: he did not know their origin.

Noga had begun to loosen her grip on the blanket. He gets the impression that she is listening, laughing from time to time and snuffling, but her face is still in the pillow and her head is covered. He tells her how his mother got him used to going to sleep in time and waking up after sunrise. How she never let him go to summer camp with the other children in the neighborhood, how she always prevented him from going on class trips and how she prevented him, as an only child orphaned of his father, from joining the army even though he longed to join a combat unit.

Noga turns over in the bed, pulls the blanket away from her face and leans back on the pillow propped on the headboard. Her eyes are red and swollen. She lowers her face, takes a tissue from the chest of drawers and blows her nose. The story amuses her. She knows this way of Herzl's, and she hates herself for always letting his tricks work on her.

"Ah, and you don't sprout a mustache at night?" she asks, laughing.

"No," he says, "the changes are internal. When I was little I noticed something. Those nights when I got up to pee, I felt that it had gotten heavier down there, a little bigger than what I was used to in the daytime."

Noga laughs aloud now. Her laughter grows louder when she looks at Herzl's face and sees him pretending to be serious.

"I knew you'd believe me," he says, "but if you want to be with me you have to believe this. 'Tonight I'll stay with youou,'" he warbles off-key.

"Okay Ahmad," she says, and laughs aloud once more.

Noga is beginning to tire of this game. She begs Herzl to stop. They finally spend one whole night together and he insists on this idiotic game. Herzl does not understand a single word she says, and tries to speak English, but Noga feels a little silly and doesn't want to play this game. Herzl had promised her in English to take her to his night places so she gets dressed to go out for the night. The two of them walk from Rashbag Street to Gaza Road, and wait for a cab at the bus stop. When the first one stops, Herzl sticks his head in the window and said "No thanks" in English to the driver. Noga doesn't understand. He explains that this

taxi company had avowed not to hire Arab drivers, so he is boycotting them. He ends with a curse, again in English, about these fascists who hate human beings. Then they head to East Jerusalem, the Arab sector of the city, which no nice Jewish girl has any business visiting.

Herzl is really uncomfortable with the fact that he has brought an Israeli Jewish girl along that night. Although some of the regulars at the pub are radical Jewish girls from Ta'ayoush, he despises them and feels that the activists' motives have more to do with an internal Israeli conflict and don't come from the right place. They have their own agendas.

He has no alternative; he will introduce Noga as a lawyer from the Association for Civil Rights. She nods when he gives the cover story, and nods again for him to stop it already, even though somehow she feels in her heart that this is his way of proposing to her. She does not doubt that it will happen tonight. Probably last night was part of the game too. There is nothing she could do about it—Herzl had always been a little weird.

When he pushes the pub door open to leave, she is certain that all their friends will be waiting there to shout, "Surprise!" But nothing happens. She walks behind this man, who speaks Arabic like he had taken it in with his mother's milk, greeting people left and right, shaking hands and stopping at his regular table. When he hugs and kisses a few young men who look completely Arab, she stares at him. Something really has changed. Nothing in his appearance, but everything else has changed nevertheless. The conversation is becoming heated in a language she doesn't understand. Now and then she hears "Gaza" or "Ramallah." She feels lost and looks at her beloved, trying to remember the person who was there only an hour ago, but now she watches him sip arak and smoke cigarettes, something she's never seen before. He doesn't look at her at all, ignores her purposefully. When their eyes meet by chance, his spark with suspicion and revulsion. She does not want to remain there one minute more, but she does not want to interrupt and cut off the conversation. Who knows what the reaction would be?

They do not stay there very long, maybe an hour and a half. With hugs and kisses, he takes leave of his friends and goes out to catch a cab in Sheikh Jarrah. They do not speak at all during the ride to his apartment. The neighbor's dog barks hysterically and Herzl curses it in Arabic. He takes his key ring and opens a locked cupboard, full of books in Arabic. He selects one of them and sits down to read it. "So?" asks Noga, in English this time, and her voice trembles a bit. "Are you from the Hamas or something?"

"How dare you?" he almost scolds her, insulted, knowing that to a Jewish girl, Hamas is a code word for terrorist. "Popular Front," he replies. He reads the book until he falls asleep. Noga stays on the sofa, at a safe distance. She doesn't shut an eye the whole night, and watches him sleep instead. Even as he sleeps he isn't the same. He awakens, startled by the sunrise, and glances around to see that he is in safe surroundings. Noga watches him with a look of love. He smiles at her. "Good morning, Darling," he says. She looks quite tranquil; this is the man she knows well.

"So?" she asks with a smile.

"What, Sweetie?"

"What's going to happen with this whole Arab story?"

"If you ask me," he says on his way to the bathroom, "they can all go up in smoke."

¹A clear, unsweetened, anise-flavored liquor, arak is the alcoholic drink of preference among Arabs of the Middle East.

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