

Myra Shonen

No one was hiring me. Not with my notoriety. So, when Naomi asked if I would cover her class while she went on sabbatical, I jumped at the gig.

On the first day of class, a dozen or so sleepy students sauntered into the room. I had arranged the chairs in a semicircle, then switched it to a long row, then back again. The sun shone brightly in the Jerusalem sky.

I began by asking everyone to introduce themselves and briefly explain what drove them to this class, *Writing Your Story*, English 100-217.

No one spoke, so I began.

“I’m Myra Shonen, adjunct professor,” I said, feeling brave. “Professor Hasna is on sabbatical and I’ll be covering this class for her.”

I saw a lot of blinking eyes and disappointment. Naomi was working on a book in Australia focused on marriages between Aborigine and white citizens. I almost dreaded seeing how well the book would do, while my own writing collected emojis from high school friends.

I offered my credentials. “I’ve published a few essays on my experiences in the IDF and the army’s impact on our environment.” No one was impressed.

Of course, the only real credential I have is that I am a 28-year-old struggling writer with an MFA that I obtained pass/fail. But I’m more widely known in Israel as the woman whose love affair with a soldier contributed to his death, as well as those of four of his colleagues.

An ultra-orthodox student sat amongst the class, his black clothing in accordance with Haredi Jewish law. Opposite the circle sat a squat woman with short hair and a powerful physique. She wore army pants and thick boots.

The ultra-orthodox student fixed his eyes on me. His side curls hung from his shorn head where a thick skullcap lay.

“What unit were you in?” he asked.

“Northern Command,” I said. A normal question.

“Combat?” he asked.

“Crisis negotiation, if you must know.” I paused. “Ben, is it?”

“Ben.” He pointed to himself.

“Well, Ben, as I mentioned, the focus of my writings was the environmental impact of the IDF. I published three works on the army’s impact on Egyptian fruit bats that I hope to...”

“Positive or negative?” Ben interrupted.

“Positive or negative what?” I asked. “There was nothing positive or negative about the bats. I wasn't putting electric lights in the caves.”

A few students laughed.

“She’s not freakin’ Batgirl,” the woman in army pants said in English. Her hair was cropped short. A white T-shirt was tucked into army pants with a thick black belt and boots. Her name was Chaya.

“Why are you asking? *People* like you are exempt from service and you don’t pay taxes. You got us all serving you. Want me to get you lunch also?”

Ben looked at her like an uninvited guest at Shabbat dinner. “I taught Torah to soldiers, lady” he said.

“He taught Torah...” Chaya said, throwing a thumb his way... “while we all did three years of combat training, or worse.” She shot a look at Ben. “And by the way, friend, I’m a dude now, not a lady. That in Torah too?”

Sides were taken in the class, but Chaya’s calm delivery won the skirmish. Young people were tired of serving years in the IDF while the Haredim were excused.

“Well, enough with the introductions,” I said. “Let’s leave the war of words to the page.”

Chaya gave me a thin smile. Ben looked away.

“Professor Hasna has called this class *Writing Your Story*, emphasis on *Your*, so let’s get into the muck.” The class began to fumble with notebooks and pens. A few strands of my long curly hair fell out of the bun on my head into my eyes.

“Let’s start with a writing prompt,” I said. “The prompt is...kitchen table. We will take ten minutes and then read our work aloud.”

“Begin.” I hit the timer on my watch.

I gazed outside the classroom where the east wall dividing Jerusalem was visible from the Mount Scopus hilltop. Arab homes sat on the downside, Jewish on the other, both sharing the same sunshine and satellite TV waves.

I decided to try my hand at my own assignment.

‘Arik and I sat across the breakfast table. He had gotten up early and cooked for me. There were eggs, jam and coffee, and there were scents from all three. We often did not speak. Attraction is a word that describes so many relationships, but ours was more a compulsion to touch. As we sat on opposite sides of the table, I noticed that the grain of the wood went in opposite directions. Maybe if I

had just taken a cue from the table, I would have gone my way and let him go his before it ended up so....'

I knew where this was going of course. Like my endless memoir writing, mostly about him, it was going to end in his real-life death by ambush, along with four other soldiers at his base in Har Dov. All of Israel now knows that he had been writing a love letter to a woman who was not his wife when they were attacked. I was and will always be that other woman, the whore. The media reported that the five Israeli deaths were due to the distraction caused by one soldier's illicit affair. Somehow, the Jerusalem Post had obtained a photo of us together at a bar last summer. The hate mail still finds me.

My watch buzzed and I stopped writing.

"Who wants to start?" I asked.

A half hand went up from Chaya. She began to read.

'We had sex on the kitchen table, but she thought it was making love.'

She looked up as if she were at a table read of a script, and she got the stares she wanted, or didn't. I couldn't tell.

'But it was really a war. I didn't want to be there, and neither did she. It was my idea. I was Jack Nicholson, and she was Jessica Lange, but I am not even sure she saw the movie.'

Ben got up and stood by the door. He actually covered his ears, and Chaya finished.

Comments followed, polite, appreciative.

“Who’s next?” I asked.

“Kitchen table,” Ben began without asking. There was a cut of sunlight across his scalp that gave his face a light and a dark side. He went back to his seat.

‘Our kitchen table was a place to avoid. It was where my father and mother ended their conversations and where the bitterness and anger and violence started against me and my brothers. We only found peace in shul.’

It seemed to me that even the cars passing outside stopped.

‘The front door opened with my father’s familiar whistling when he returned from the seminary where he taught. My five brothers and I all looked at one another as if an intruder had stepped into the foyer and was coming to the kitchen to find us and do what he would with our bodies.’

The discomfort in the class had no sound, only weight as the story went on to its raw conclusion.

‘But when my father was not there, the kitchen table felt safe. I could be among the others in my family who understood. So that this place became our detente where we would wade together in a pool of uncertainty.’

“Powerful stuff,” I offered. “I felt like I was right there at the table with your family. Honest writing, Ben.”

Many of the other students nodded and made comments as well. His writing had captured the attention of the moment, no cell phones buzzed, no pens danced on pages.

“Let’s take a ten-minute break and then we will continue. Please be back here at 9:05. Ten minutes,” I went outside to smoke a cigarette

“Don’t believe everything you read,” someone said. I whirled around and inadvertently blew smoke into his face. It was Ben.

“Menthol,” he said flatly.

“Sorry.”

“It was just something I made up. You know, the kitchen table writing prompt. It just came up.”

I took another drag of my cigarette, put it out on the wood railing and extinguished the residue with my manicured pointer finger.

“Blood red, huh?” Ben observed. “Hardly modest for a Jewish woman.”

I ignored his comment. “Why would you write fiction in a memoir class, Ben?”

“This is a memoir class? That’s rotten! Where does it say memoir? I thought it was called *Writing Your Story*.” His thick glasses were smudged.

With each statement, his voice grew louder and I found myself backing away.

“It’s a memoir class, Mister...”

“Pelzig.” I offered my hand, but he pulled his back. I remembered that Haredim cannot touch members of the opposite sex, except wives and children.

“But if you are writing fiction, then I think it would be helpful for the class to know,” I said.

“The lines between fact and fiction, fantasy and reality,” he said to no one. He looked at me as if he were an officer at passport control. “I. Know. You,” he said, swirling a finger around at my body.

The break could not end soon enough.

The class regrouped.

“Before we begin again, I’d like to make an announcement.” Feet tapped on the tiled floor.

“During the break,” I began, “a class member mentioned that he was unaware that this was a memoir class, and...” I looked at Ben for further permission to speak, and he nodded. “It was Mr. Pelzig, whose passionate story that appeared to be about his father was not necessarily a piece reflecting his own experiences, but rather...”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t my experience,” Ben interrupted. “I said I didn’t know it was a memoir class.” He put out his hands in mock surrender. “Nowhere in the course description did it *specify* memoir. It simply said, *Writing Your Story*.” His fingers made air quotes as he spoke. The strands of his prayer shawl peeked out from his shirt.

“Well, do you want to tell us whether your story was true, or just some made up shit?” Chaya challenged Ben.

“I don’t answer to dogs,” Ben shot back. The two traded laser-beam stares. She seemed on the verge of making a physical move toward him, but then thought better.

“Mr. Pelzig!” I called out. But the infighting in Israel was part of our culture. It was a miracle we didn't kill each other before our enemies did it for us.

“I signed up for this class to tell my story,” he said, pulling out his Talmud. “And to right the wrongs of sin.”

“Synagogues down the street, buddy,” Chaya said.

No one spoke. Ben was beginning to rock his body in prayer.

I broke the silence.

“True, false, accurate, or invented...our memoirs--and this is primarily a memoir class, Mr. Pelzig--are our stories, and we are here to bravely share on the public page some of what has long been kept hidden away in our personal journals and private thoughts. It's helpful for the class to be informed whether your work is real or imagined.”

The last of the students read their stories aloud.

“For Friday's class, I would like for you all to give me 1,000 words in response to a new prompt, and I will give you a choice. Choose the theme 'house' or 'secret.'”

A series of questions followed. Could we change place and time? Do the memories have to be about us?

“I will be working late in my office on Thursday night, so please drop off a hard copy by 7 p.m., Room 4503, Humanities Building. I'd like a chance to review them prior to class discussion on Friday morning. Any questions?”

“What if we don't want to remember?” It was Ben.

“Remember what?” I asked, gathering my belongings.

“The details,” he said. The question held weight for me.

He gave his head a full neck roll. I didn't know what would come out on the other side.

"Then make it up, creep," Chaya said, "like you did before," and she slammed her notebook.

"Please," I said. I could feel my crisis negotiation skills getting ready to kick in, but the two students ignored one another and headed toward the door, comfortably spaced apart.

The only crisis I couldn't solve was my own.

It was Thursday evening and I sat in Naomi's office getting ready to read through the manuscripts for class the next morning. I flipped through all of them and found that a few were missing. It was going to be a long night.

In the empty hallways, huge air conditioning ducts kicked in. The door of the office was still half closed from Chaya's departure. On the desk was a photo of Naomi with her husband and new baby taken on the beach in front of the Sheraton Tel Aviv.

I turned back to the manuscripts. I placed Ben's at the bottom, knowing I would have to deal with it eventually.

They were all competent writers, some heavy on adjectives, others more on adverbs. Undergrad writing reminded me of homegrown fireworks, heavy with booms and fizzles.

I found myself breaking into a sweat as I drew closer to Ben's piece and I didn't know why. I was just hoping for calm prose about a house he grew up in, or maybe a secret crush on a girl.

But what I encountered in Ben's piece I could never have prepared myself for, and I live with it to this day. I read slowly, picking up speed and slowing down to catch my breath, like I was driving in a school zone at night.

He titled the piece "Burnt House." I began to read.

'Three Yeshiva students were shot and killed after being picked up hitchhiking, so we hatched a plan to avenge the crime according to the Talmud and Jewish law. A Palestinian boy of similar age would fit the bill and we chose our target over several days, observing, calculating, and tracking him. On the designated night, we entered the house two by two. I was elected commander of the operation, but I chose to stay outside as a lookout. If all was to go as planned, the operation would take a total of ninety seconds. If confronted by anyone inside, we would kill the enemy with the M16s a few of us had managed to obtain from friends in the IDF. If we were merely noticed, we would neutralize the subjects in their chairs, beds, or wherever they were confronted.'

I knew this story. Everyone in Israel knew...this story. I did a quick search on my computer and felt the air in my lungs collapse.

Palestinian Teen Abducted and Killed in Suspected
Revenge Attack by Hard-liner Israelis*

I dug further, now remembering where I was when the story broke.

The bodies of three missing Israeli teenage Yeshiva students who disappeared almost three weeks ago have been found buried in a shallow grave under rocks in a valley close to the southern West Bank city of Hebron.**

I continued to read Ben's piece, holding it like it was a scorching pot.

'We chose the boy Abu Khdeir's home in Shuafat at random, mainly because it bordered Pisgat Ze'ev, where we lived. We entered the house in full military gear and one of us opened the door of the boy's bedroom. The boy was blindfolded, gagged, and delivered to our vehicle. When he was inside the car, I questioned him in Arabic. 'Did your family know them?' 'No. I don't know anybody.' 'The teenagers you dog people abducted and killed! Did you know them?' I knew the answer, but the questions felt good coming from my lips. Revenge is a cloudy pool of emotion that sends out uncontrollable waves in all directions. We drove past closed-up falafel stands in the silence of early morning, heading toward the Jerusalem forest.'

I put aside the paper and clicked on the next link in all of its horrifying detail:

Palestinian Kidnap Victim Was Burned Alive,
Autopsy Showed, in Revenge Killing

'We all watched as the grave was dug. I don't remember who poured the gasoline over the boy, but I do remember who lit the match. The passage of time dulls the facts so that all that is left are the handpicked memories that serve our purposes. Our lives are full of mistakes, misdeeds, and correct behavior. It is only over time that we learn to tell the difference. I leave it to Adonai to judge me for my crime. I am just not sure that I can live with it.'

I put down the pages of the story, sickened and dizzy. Across the room, an antique mirror caught my frozen image. I felt a strange itchiness on my neck, with sweat creeping down. The university building clicked with odd sounds in the night. All I knew, and that most people in Israel knew, was that the perpetrators of this famous and hideous crime were still at large.

I called my twin sister. Leah answered on the first ring, probably by accident.

"Do you remember a year ago when that Palestinian boy was burned alive by some maniacs after the three Yeshiva students were murdered on the highway near Gush Etzion?" I asked. My body was kinetic.

"No," she said, then, "Wait, yes, why?"

"Well, I think one of my students may have been involved in that horror story."

“Then why are you calling me?” I heard her boyfriend playing guitar in the background, and he grabbed the phone.

“*Ma kore*, Myra,” he said. laughing

“*Kore*, Elazar,” I said.

Leah grabbed the phone back. “Wait, what?” she asked. “What the hell, Myra, are you some kind of Mossad bitch in super training? You are probably mistaken,” she said, laughing. “How do you know he’s involved?”

“I think I am reading his confession in the memoir class I’m teaching.”

“No one is that dumb. Check it out and, I don’t know, call the Dean or something. That can’t be true. I love you but I gotta go.” And she hung up with the sound of Elazar strumming in the background.

Outside, streetlights illuminated parts of the city no one wanted to see. A dumpster, a highway overpass. An Arab grocer.

I heard a knock on my door.

“How do you like my story?” the voice said.

I continued to look out the window, not wanting to seem alarmed, not wanting to ignore the voice, a voice that I now knew.

I whirled my chair around and found Ben standing in my office. His pudgy frame was supported by thick black shoes.

“Ben,” I said. It was all I could say.

“Fact or fiction. Memoir or made up. What’s the difference really, hey?”

“Can I help you with something Ben? I was just finishing up.”

“I know who you are, Myra Shonen.”

I felt a surge of panic and quietly hit 'redial' on my phone, then coughed loudly when Leah answered to cover what I knew would be a loud response. It worked.

"Who am I, Ben?" I spoke as loud as I could.

"You are the shiksa who was the cause of the deaths of five Israeli soldiers, one of whom I knew...very well." His voice rose with each word and his eyes glistened with tears.

"Ben, please...this is not the place for this kind of conversation," I said, pointing out the door, toward, I don't know where. "Security makes rounds," I said, hoping Leah could hear the words and call someone.

"I read yours. Ben, is what you wrote...true?" I picked up his manuscript.

His eyes averted mine. He took out an item that was wrapped in felt, like the covering for a traveling Torah. He cradled the item, and I was praying it was not what I thought it was.

"Why are you here? You're scaring me, Ben," I said.

I could only hope that Leah could hear my desperate tone.

"You want to know if what I wrote is true, don't you? You want to call the police, don't you? Well go ahead, because the answer is...I'm writing my story, in your class, Myra Shonen, and while I was doing that, I came across your story, and now...our stories are linked." He clasped his hand together violently and sat down opposite me.

I was pinned in my office by body, and however this situation was going to end, it was going to have to go through him.

"Did you know that my brother was one of the soldiers killed when your boyfriend was supposed to be guarding the base? Did you know that, Myra Shonen?"

I looked at him with both sympathy and terror.

“Now we both have blood on our hands.” He pulled out his Talmud and began leafing through the pages.

I began to move out of my seat, getting ready to break for the door.

Ben was lost in the pages but when he noticed my movement, he dropped the book in his lap, and started to unwrap what was hidden in the small felt blanket.

“We are together in sin,” he said. His hand shook as he uncovered a small pistol from beneath its hiding place.

I heard more footsteps and looked up to see a security officer poking his head in the door. He was an old man whose wrinkled face was lost under his blue cap.

“I saw some lights and just wanted to check in. Everything OK here?” he asked. I saw that his only weapons were his walkie-talkie and a blue shirt.

Ben’s back was to the door. He gripped the pistol firmly and pointed it directly at me. His eyes told me not to scream. I was the one trapped in this situation, and it was mine to get out of.

“Fine. We were just going over some work,” I said evenly. “Thank you.” I looked down on the floor and could see that my phone was still connected to Leah. The seconds clicked by on the phone timer. I could only pray she was calling the police.

“Ben, I am not your enemy,” I said. “What happened in my life is the story of Israel itself. Our people...” I thought back to my training in crisis negotiation, but it lay in my mind like useless fractions memorized in high school.

“Shut up, shiksa!” he screamed and stood up. “Reform Jews! Affairs with married men! Arabs allowed to vote in the Knesset! Your life is as ruined as mine, Myra Shonen!” He looked behind him to see if the security guard heard his shout. He was sweating. I had no doubt he would shoot me.

“Ben...please.” I was strangely calm, but I spoke loudly, hoping that Leah could also hear the words coming from my killer. I thought of the key phrase--BATNA--which was my training, *the best alternative to a negotiated situation*. I tried to remember everything else--listening, mirroring, all the techniques, but nothing could prepare me for the eyes of my own killer sitting less than a meter away.

I began to realize that I would die in this academic office, with the personal photos of families I would never have myself. I began to hyperventilate and shake.

Ben put a hand on my shoulder. “Calm down, Myra Shonen. You told us to write our stories, and I wrote mine. I don’t regret what I did, but I know that I can’t live with its memory. My confession is now written down, so I can go in peace. And so can you.”

My face began to twitch, and I could feel sweat moving along my legs.

“Is this why you came to this class?” I muttered.

“I came to this class to confess my story. To let all of Israel know that...I believed what I did was right under Jewish law before I die.” He was no longer speaking to me. His body rocked back and forth. I was not sure if he was praying. I moved to stand, but his eyes flew open, and he stepped away from me, his outstretched arm pointing the pistol at my neck.

“We will die together. I for murder, and you for killing. The Talmud makes a difference. It is the only way. Start praying, Myra Shonen.”

I could feel my body go into spasms, my eyes fluttering uncontrollably. My mind spun through the training exercise I was taught to defuse situations. The mirror across the room reminded me of a key technique. Recite back the words to the distressed person. It shows you are listening, understanding.

“The Talmud distinguishes the difference,” I said, not understanding the words that I repeated. But people in crisis need to be heard and understood, however bizarre and nonsensical they are. It is the only way out.

Ben’s eyes sprung open, and he became excited. “Yes! The Talmud distinguishes a difference!”

“But why take me with you Ben?” In this moment, I had a sudden clarity that if I were able to stall, to get out of here, to live my life one more day, I would throw off the bags of guilt and anger and self-loathing that had become my life. I was not to blame.

“You...” he said, pointing his other finger at me like he did when we were on break in class. “You are what is wrong with Israel! There is so much wrong! I never meant to meet you, but now that I did, the book of Genesis says...I shall stand guilty before you forever. Now WE shall stand guilty before you. You and I, Myra Shonen!”

I saw his mouth forming the words and the wrinkles on his forehead growing agitated. The training I was given was now nothing but old rules on a whiteboard I had once memorized. I instinctively raised my arms to cover my eyes.

Ben mistook my gesture.

“This is not the Shema prayer, Myra,” he said, referencing the traditional Shabbat gesture of Jewish women. “You do not need to fear G-d.” He reached out and touched my arm in a soothing manner. I felt the sweat of his fingers.

I saw the office door slowly open.

Chaya.

Papers in hand.

As she took in the situation, her eyes grew wide, and her stance became rigid.

“I do not need to fear G-d,” I mirrored, trembling, looking at Chaya.

“Yes! Yes! Pray!” Ben screamed. He now held the gun at my abdomen and reached out for my hand with the other. I took it.

“*Yitgadal v’yitkadash sh’mei raba b’alma di-v’ra*,” he began, rocking his body. The Mourners’ Kaddish, said before death.

To my horror, I saw Chaya silently close the door, leaving me to die. I looked down at the phone. The call was still going. Four minutes thirty-five seconds, thirty-six, thirty-seven...

“Ben, tell me...how you feel about what happened?” I managed to say. *Ask open-ended questions*. It was my last chance.

And in that moment, in that instant, I heard the bang.

At first, I didn’t know what had transpired, who was hit and who was still living, but the seconds gave way to a clear outcome.

The door of the office had flown open with the strength of a powerful military kick together with a powerful command.

"Halt!" she yelled.

In an instant, Chaya had rushed Ben, and, in the chaos, I instinctively fell to the floor. While they struggled, I made my way around them and out of the office. The security guard was now running toward the scene, calling for backup on his walkie-talkie.

Chaya had flipped Ben over on his back and held his wrist, but the gun remained locked in his hand. He pointed it toward her, but she flattened his wrist against the floor. Through it all, he continued to recite the prayer, but he was laughing in between the Hebrew words.

“Psycho people! Bane of our country!” Chaya yelled out, but her restraint slipped, and the gun was again held firmly in Ben’s hand. “You taught Torah? I was Military Police in the Hamas terror tunnels, buddy!” She raised a fist and hit him squarely in his nose. Blood spurted from his face.

And then I heard Ben's final words.

The very end of the Kaddish, words I had heard my entire life. It ended simply.

Amen.

I heard the shot and watched Chaya fall onto her back. I closed my eyes for what felt like ten thousand years.

When I opened them, I saw Chaya was now sitting up, and Ben lying dead from a gunshot wound to his head, the weapon still in his own hand.

The End