

# The Manifest Station

FINDING STILLNESS IN MOTION

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## MEANWHILE

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Amir pulled his taxi into the circular driveway and idled the engine. He liked to pick up fares at the King David hotel on Saturday evenings, when the American tourists, anxious to get to the airport to catch overnight flights to New York, had no interest in making pointless conversation with the taxi driver. The King David was still the classiest hotel in Jerusalem, in Amir's opinion, and the guests were the most generous tippers.

But he was picky. Amir avoided the religious families. The heavy suitcases bursting and tied up with cord, the men holding round hat boxes on their laps, the women exhausted and cranky, the children—four, five, six of them—dressed in matching outfits, fingers sticky with candy, eyes heavy with sleep. He had nothing against religion or children. Amir had grown up with a heavy dose of traditional Judaism that stuck to his bones, and he adored his pious father. He and his wife Tamar had married off three daughters, only the youngest boy, Yonatan, still at home eating his mother's food and challenging his grandfather's old-fashioned ideas. What Amir couldn't handle was the crying and the bickering in the enclosed space of his car. Give him a business traveler in pressed khakis and a button down shirt, briefcase in one hand and garment bag in the other. No hassles.

Still, it was illegal, or bad form at the least, to choose which passengers to pick up. For that, Amir relied on Udi, a cop and old army buddy, who worked security at the hotel when off-duty. Udi was a

bouncer with a gun, throwing his substantial heft around without the benefit of superior intelligence or strategic purpose. Early in their service, Amir had saved Udi's ass during a combat training exercise, and he never forgot. Udi couldn't repay him, but on the nights he worked at the hotel he steered the uncomplicated travelers to Amir.

Amir drove toward the front entrance where a casually dressed man and a woman stood close together, heads bowed and typing on their cell phones. One piece of soft-sided luggage each at their feet. Amir wouldn't need Udi tonight. If he was lucky, they'd be on their emails all the way to Ben Gurion.

As Amir pulled closer, he saw a woman standing off to one side under the lights. She might have been fifty as easily as thirty; tall with remarkable posture, her flimsy yellow dress loose on her willowy frame. She had her arms wrapped around herself as though she were cold, although the approaching sunset hadn't put a dent in the heat of the sweltering August day. Her hair hung down long and straight over her shoulders and the color reminded Amir of wet sand on the beach in Netanya where he'd grown up. As he drove past her, Amir felt the woman's gaze fixed on him. In the headlights he imagined that her eyes were the color of sea-glass.

Hitting the brakes, he reversed slowly. A taxi driver behind him leaned on his horn, and Amir opened his window and gestured for the car to go around him. The driver picked up the cell phone couple. Amir put the car in park and got out.

Up close, the woman looked less fragile. "Where are you headed?"

"To the airport."

Amir popped the trunk and picked up the woman's suitcase. Her arms weren't wrapped around herself as Amir had initially thought. She was holding a briefcase tightly against her chest. When he reached for it, she took a step back.

"I will hold on to this one."

Amir shrugged. "Up to you." Her English was more fluid than his own, but he couldn't place the accent.

"Where are you from?" he asked, when she was settled in the back seat.

"Antwerp."

"I've never been." He didn't say so, but the truth was, Amir had never been anywhere that his taxi couldn't take him. Or his tank, in years gone by.

They rode in silence for a few minutes, Amir looking at his passenger in the rear view mirror as much as safe driving would allow. She'd strapped the briefcase in with the seatbelt beside her, although she'd left herself unbuckled.

"Have you been in Israel long?" He wondered at his own curiosity. What did it matter? In a moment she'd be gone.

“Two weeks.”

“What did you think?” Amir slammed on the brakes and hit the horn as a red Mazda shot out in front of him, cutting him off.

“I think Israeli drivers are crazy.”

Amir chuckled. “Driving here is like being back in combat.”

She nodded, momentarily locking eyes with him in the mirror. “Which was your war?”

Amir slowed the cab. The question startled him. The phrasing and the tone mimicked the way Israelis asked each other about the horrors seen by innocent eyes, the nation’s young soldiers always on the front lines of a conflict or war. It was an offhand question that got to the guts of the collective experience of the country, the bravado a scant cover for the trauma that lay just beneath the surface. It wasn’t a question asked by outsiders from Antwerp.

Still, he answered her. “Yom Kippur.”

Her voice was smooth and musical, beguiling. “Sometimes it’s easier to speak about such things with a stranger.” How did she know that he didn’t talk about those experiences, not even with his own children when he saw them off to their own wars?

Amir strained to keep his eyes trained on the road, grateful that there wasn’t much traffic. When the woman spoke again, she took a different tack.

“Where are you from?”

“Here. Where else?”

“Somewhere before.”

“Why do you think so? I told you, I was a soldier in 1973. I was eighteen then. I was born in Jerusalem, in 1955.”

It had started to rain. The woman turned her face to look out the window as Amir flipped on the windshield wipers. The swishing sound filled the silent space between them, obscuring the pointless lie he had told. He could feel the woman would bide her time until he answered her question truthfully, holding her peace until they reached the airport if necessary. Amir felt a pressure in his throat, a choking sensation, the words he tried to suppress bubbling up into his mouth.

“My father was born in Iran in 1930 into one of the wealthiest families in the country. They were in textiles, with factories, warehouses, a fleet of trucks for distribution. In January, 1955, my father was a young man, ready to learn the business and enjoy the family’s wealth. My mother was pregnant with me, but they didn’t know it yet.”

“How fortunate for your parents.” She leaned forward a bit in the back seat, flirtatious, no longer a

middle-aged woman, but a teenage girl. Amir glimpsed her collarbone at the neckline of her yellow dress, could imagine her breasts. He focused on the road as he spoke.

“Not so fortunate. Soon after I was born, my father became very sick with excruciating headaches that no painkiller made better. Because they had money, my grandparents were able to send him abroad to Europe to receive treatment. He had to leave my pregnant mother behind. He was gone for nearly a year, missed my entry into the world. By the time he had regained his health and was ready to go back to Iran, the government had taken pretty much everything his parents had.”

Amir tried to catch her eyes in the rearview mirror, to see if his earlier lie about where he was born had registered, but she was looking out her window. The rain had picked up into a downpour.

“It doesn’t rain here in this season,” Amir said. “It doesn’t rain until after the festival of Sukkot.”

“Apparently it does.” The rain was so loud on the rooftop that Amir could hardly hear her. The strangeness of the weather frightened him. He wanted to drive faster, to drop her off, to go home to Tamar. But the highway was slick and it was getting dark. And the woman had a plane to catch.

Amir gripped the steering wheel and tried to keep his hands from shaking. When the woman implored him to continue his story, he felt powerless to resist.

“Through their connections, my father was able to arrange for my mother and me to come to Israel; he met us soon after. We had nothing. My father dreamed of starting a new textile business and regaining his wealth. Meanwhile, he learned a trade. He became a locksmith.”

Amir felt a surge of anger run through him at his father’s humiliation, the way he’d run at the beck and call of a housewife who’d left a pot on the stove in the kitchen and her keys inside when she stepped out, the door locking behind her. But as quickly as the anger came, it passed. His father hadn’t been humiliated. He’d been humble and grateful. “My father worked hard. He took care of his family. He maintained his traditions.”

“And what did you dream for your life?”

“I wanted to go to University to study literature.” Amir smiled. It seemed so far away and so absurd now. He gestured toward his taxi. “This is my meanwhile.”

The rain had petered out, and they were quiet as they approached the airport. Amir pulled up behind the line of taxis and opened the door for the woman before taking her suitcase out of the trunk. He had the sensation that he needed to tell her something more, to offer her something she could take with her back to Antwerp that would mark their unlikely connection. But he had nothing in the car except the second half of the egg salad sandwich Tamar had made him for his dinner.

“Well,” Amir said, “I wish you a safe trip home. Maybe you will visit our little country again sometime.”

She took a step toward him. She kissed her fingertips and then pressed them softly onto Amir’s chest, over his heart. Then she turned and walked away. By the time he realized she hadn’t paid the fare, she’d already disappeared into the terminal.

Amir sat down in the driver's seat and waited for his head to clear. He turned to take a look in the backseat, wondering if he could conjure the woman for just a few more moments. Instead, he saw the briefcase, buckled in safely.

"Damn it!"

Amir parked the car in the lot and ran over to the terminal, the briefcase knocking against his leg as we went. The line to check in snaked back and forth, hundreds of passengers waiting. It had been less than ten minutes, but the woman was nowhere to be seen. He sat down on a bench near the entrance to examine the briefcase. It was locked, and there was no identification on the outside. He shook it gently and heard only a muted shuffling.

Trudging back to his car, Amir alternated between cursing the woman and touching the spot she had kissed with her fingers. He placed the briefcase carefully in the front passenger seat and buckled it in as she had. Then he drove home, giving up on the rest of his shift.

When he arrived at the apartment hours ahead of schedule, Tamar fretted.

"Your son is growing like a weed. He needs new clothes all the time, and eats more than all three of the girls combined. How can you come home at 8 p.m.?"

"Relax, Tamar. It's just a few hours of lost fares. Have we ever gone without?" Then he told her about the woman, leaving out the kiss to his heart and the feeling of longing he'd had in her presence. Amir showed Tamar the briefcase.

"Well, open it. Maybe her name is written on something inside. What are you waiting for?"

"It's locked."

"And your father is a locksmith. You know how to open a cheap lock on a cheap briefcase." Tamar went to the silverware drawer. "What do you need? A knife?"

Amir hesitated, but Tamar was insistent. "A paper clip and maybe a screwdriver." His hands were shaking again like they had in the car.

In a few minutes he had the briefcase open

They both stood back from the table, mesmerized by the neat bundles of bills tied with rubber bands. When he could tear his eyes away, Amir slammed down the cover of the briefcase.

Tamar drifted over to a kitchen chair and sat down heavily. "How much do you think is in there?"

"I don't know. A lot. But it isn't ours. And keep your voice down please. You'll wake my father."

"Then whose is it? You found it! We're barely getting by. God gave you this reward for your hard work."

Amir picked up his car keys. "I don't know that God was involved here, Tamari."

She got to her feet and stood between her husband and the door leading from the kitchen to the front hallway. "Where are you going?"

Amir sidestepped her and left the apartment, Tamar's voice still ringing in his ears.

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When he reached the police station, Udi was manning the intake desk.

"Brother! What's happening?" He came around the desk and slapped Amir on the back. "You missed me at the hotel so much you came here to visit?"

Amir put the briefcase on the counter between them. "I wish you had been at the hotel. You could have saved me a whole mess of trouble."

"What are you talking about? What is this?" Udi ran his fingers over the leather briefcase. "This is classy stuff. Whose is it?"

"A woman I took to the airport left it in my car. Buckled into the back seat. Open it. Don't worry, it won't explode."

Udi opened the briefcase. His eyes grew wide and he whistled through his teeth. "Wow, wow, wow," he said, under his breath. Then he looked around the room and closed the briefcase. "Get out, Amir. Take this and go."

"What are you, crazy? You're supposed to be the law, Udi."

"First, I'm your friend. This is enough money to change your life forever. You can buy the children houses, get Tamar fancy jewelry, go and study your precious literature. And we'll be even. You don't know who this woman is, and she's never going to be able to find you." He closed his eyes as if deep in thought. "Maybe she meant it as a tip for your wonderful driving."

"Listen, I appreciate what you're trying to do, but I don't want anything to do with this woman or her money." If Udi noticed him blush, he didn't say anything.

Udi picked up the briefcase and took several steps toward the back of the station house. "Ok, ok. I know when you get your head set on something, you don't change your mind. Go home to your wife and family."

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When Amir walked through the door, Tamar was waiting, her eyes teary. "Your father has taken a turn," she whispered.

Yonatan was sitting by his grandfather's bedside, holding his hand.

"Abba!" Yonatan yelled to Amir.

"Abba!" Amir yelled to his father.

It was too late.

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On the last day of the shiva, Tamar approached Amir where he sat with his childhood friends in the living room, reminiscing.

“Do you remember the time your old man helped me break into the school after hours because I left my textbook inside and I had a big test the next day?” Shlomo laughed, patting Amir’s knee. “He was a wizard at locks. A genius.”

“You’re full of it. He was as honest as the day is long.” But Amir knew the story was true. His father could always be counted on to help.

“Amir,” Tamar interrupted. “Udi is here,” she said.

Amir shrugged. “Nu? He’s come to give his condolences. Just under the wire. Tell him to come in.”

“I don’t know. Please, come to the kitchen. He’s waiting for you.”

Amir got up slowly from his low chair, his legs stiff and aching. From the hallway he could see Udi’s broad shoulders as they filled the doorway. He thought to retreat to the living room where his friends continued to share memories about his father. But when he turned, Tamar was behind him. “Go.”

Udi wasted no time handing Amir the briefcase. “It’s been a week. No one has come to inquire or to claim this. I won’t hold it for you any longer.”

“Don’t you have a word of consolation for me?” Amir pleaded.

“I’m sorry for your loss, Amiri.” Udi put his hand on Amir’s shoulder. “Now go fulfill your dreams and your father’s too.”

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Amir sank down into the cushions of the chair in the hotel lounge. What had Tamar called such a chair recently? A chair and a half. She’d ordered two for the salon in her and Yonatan’s new apartment that looked out on the Old City, just a stone’s throw away from where he sat now at the bar in the King David hotel. Tamar seemed determined to spend the money on everything and nothing.

He threw back a scotch, his third. He signaled to the waiter.

“Come, have a drink with me,” Amir called out. His voice was louder than he realized, and a couple at the next table looked up from their lunch.

The waiter looked down at him. “I’m working, sir. Anyway, it’s early.”

“If you won’t join me, I’ll have a double for both of us.” The waiter walked back to the bar to fill the order.

Amir hung his head. “This morning I said the Kaddish prayer for my father for the last time,” he said,

to no one in particular. “Eleven months of mourning. And in that time, I’ve managed not only to lose him, but everything that was important to us both.”

The waiter had returned with Udi by his side.

“You called security on me?” Amir asked, his voice filled with shame.

“You’re drunk, my friend.” Amir could hear the disgust in Udi’s voice and he reveled in it.

The flash of a yellow dress in his peripheral vision and Amir rose on unsteady legs, lurching toward the kitchen.

“That’s her! That’s the woman!”

“What woman?” Udi said, following close on Amir’s heels.

“The one who left the briefcase. The one who destroyed my life.”

“That’s Karla. She works in the kitchen. She didn’t leave you a fortune to throw away.”

But when Amir caught up to her, he grabbed her arm and pulled her toward him. His skin tingled where it met hers and her sea glass eyes flashed in anger.

“Why?” Amir cried, as Udi stepped between them to separate them. “Why did you do it?”

The woman swayed and shimmered. Amir lunged for the woman as she faded, cracking his head on the swinging door that led into the hotel’s kitchen. Udi caught him as he fell to the ground and laid his body down, feet toward the door.