

The Company We Keep

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True Memories of International Terrorism

By: Darek Leslie

Prelude

It took me twenty years to put this story down on paper. But you should know it's not 'a story'. The things you'll read aren't "based on actual events" but are, actually, real events. Whether you believe them or not is entirely up to you.

Before reading, you should be aware that things were different in 1998. Cell phones were big in Israel, but had barely made their debut here in the States. Security in and around airports wasn't nearly what it is today as all of these events occurred before the tragic events of 9/11. And as it took me so long to put this story to ink, some restaurant and street names that I mention here may not be accurate if you looked for them today.

Although you will find that the FBI failed me miserably, this book isn't written to slander any U.S. intelligence agency. Though I will say that I had often wondered what would have been different if they truly listened the first time I called them and didn't just sit on a known sleeper cell. I've also often wondered if the terrorist cell they told me they were watching was truly sleeping or not, particularly as the terrorist strike that hit the Twin Towers and the Pentagon happened a mere three years later.

But wondering gets us nowhere.

Pre Chapter 1

If each day is a gift, where can I make some returns?

There was over a year of my life that I lived entirely on adrenaline. Ever since then, I seek that adrenaline rush, but nothing comes close to matching it. It's fun to watch in the movies, non-stop action with near death experiences, but when it's happening in real life, in real time, it's terrifying more than exhilarating. My hind sight feels more like 20-50 than 20-20, moments happening in a speed three to four times what many lives look like. In fact, it's tough to know where to begin when retelling the story. I've started and cleared the page several times.

Maybe I should start the story at the end: "It's tough to explain how it's me that ends up with a black file in the FBI cabinets somewhere in Boston."

I scratched that quickly. After all, my file might have been coded red. Or shoved behind the cabinet altogether. Or recycled in a shredder and incinerated.

Maybe I should start somewhere in the middle: "It all started with a burlap bag over my head sandwiched between two muscle-head Arabs in the back seat of a black Chevy in Virginia."

Afraid of alienating any readers through disbelief, despite having the name of my contact at the FBI, maybe I should change it up to something on the romantic side: "Azrael was a tornado, beautiful and terrifying. Watching her was mesmerizing, but if you took your eyes off her for a moment, your life would be torn apart."

That didn't seem fair. But I do have to start somewhere. You should know that this story is true. At least ninety percent of it. I've changed the names of all involved for their protection (and for mine) and there may be a few scenes I'll need to create in order to

make the unraveling of the strands of time make sense. I'm not omniscient, and the events that transpired felt disjointed. I'm not sure if even now I understand the whole picture today.

Being a romantic at heart, I'll start where many real life stories start – at a budding romance with a beautiful woman no man could ever truly hold onto.

Chapter 1 – Sort Of

I walk around like everything is fine, but deep down inside my shoe, my sock is sliding off.

Her name was Azrael. It was a fitting name as she had the beauty of an angel. Long, raven hair flowed past her shoulders. Her freckled complexion set above her ruby lips that usually smiled. She walked with confidence, knowing her figure would practically cause car accidents in the streets.

I met her a few weeks after I graduated from college. My roommate, Steve, was tasked to reacclimatize her to the US after a stint she did in Romania volunteering with an orphanage. He had been to Romania two years prior, so having him there to help her decompress made sense.

Our apartment was small, something that could be afforded by two college graduates who were still searching for work. It had a tiny kitchen, one bedroom that was barely big enough for two twin beds to be shoved against opposite walls, and close to the beach on the outskirts of Boston. The kitchen sink would drip remorselessly and the clawfoot tub took most of the bathroom real estate, surrounded by peeling plaster walls. Even then we could only afford it because our landlord gambled and would always ask for the rent early – giving us a break off the cost if we complied. It wasn't far from the college we just graduated from and set in a suburb with small silver maple trees that lined the streets.

The description of our living arrangement is important because Azrael was high maintenance. When I say high maintenance, I mean so high that it's amazing my ears didn't pop when I was around her, given the altitude of her life expectations. When she came over, it felt like Versace was visiting Conakry in Guinea. And not even the

nice parts, if there is such a thing.

The first time I met her was in Cambridge and I only accompanied Steve because he was nervous. It appeared she was nervous as well as she brought along another girl. We all met at the Greenhouse Café, sat outside in the warm Boston summer evening, and ordered salads.

Azrael took to me right away, though to this day I can't fathom why. We finished dinner, took a lazy stroll around the Cambridge shops and then took the noisy Green Line to the Red Line to home. When we parted, Azrael asked me if I'd go out with her the next night. Being the shy, post-college kid that I was, I asked if Steve would tag along.

Not wanting to be a third wheel, he brought Dima as well. Dima was a tall Russian friend who had gone to college with us. The four of us met at a smoky pool hall, grabbed a few pints and settled in at a corner pool table. She pretended she didn't know how to play and asked me to help her line up her shots. And I pretended not to take so much pleasure in being that close to her.

Azrael stayed. For weeks. I don't recall how long. We visited all parts of Boston, lingering at museums, strolling the Charles River. And we would have parties, almost every night. Our apartment was tiny, but we had a balcony that looked out over the street. It was big enough for a grill and for a few tables and chairs. These parties were never planned. People would just show up with meat to throw on the grill and alcohol to toss down their gullet. Not just any alcohol, but alcohol smuggled in their luggage like Stolichnaya and Moskovskaya Osobaya from Moscow and Tzuika from Romania. And I didn't know half of the people that strolled through the door like they were my best friends. They were from all over the world. A couple from Bulgaria, someone from Volgograd, another from

Marseilles. There was always someone from the Baltics and New Zealand.

I don't know how they found out about my place or why they felt at home enough to just come and crash, but I have a feeling Azrael had something to do with it. I didn't mind. It all felt surreal, like I was living out of a novel. Conversation had world-wide perspective and was brilliant. It was one of the best summers of my life. It was during this summer that I learned to put olive oil in my water when boiling pasta so the pasta doesn't stick together, that there was vodka stiffer than motor oil that tasted like fire and that there were socio-economic and political views from people who lived in other countries that were more real than my own egocentric outlook.

I've skimmed many details so far. Like the fact that Steve was short, had a cleft chin and looked like a crazy Italian composer with wild curly hair when he didn't pull it back. Or that I am a "medium" guy – medium height with medium length brown hair, hazel eyes and medium build for a lacrosse player. I worked out regularly, but there were muscle-heads bigger than me by far. I also managed to date beautiful women. I'm not sure how I would finagle dates with them. I never actually asked a girl out and the girls I dated could do ten times better than I. Have you ever seen a couple walking down the street and wondered how the heck one half of the couple snagged the other? Well, that was me. Wherever we went, she attracted attention.

I skim these details because we need to get to the meat of the matter. Though the story probably started during my last visit to Israel when I volunteered at the International Convention Center in Jerusalem, I can't be sure. My afternoon kidnapping may have, instead, been attributed to someone that had crashed one of the parties that summer.

Nearing the end of July, Azrael and I found ourselves in the Museum of Art, downtown Boston. Rodin was on display, but so were many impressionistic works of art. I tried to impress her with whatever I could remember of my high school French class. And that's when it finally happened. Beneath one of Monet's many paintings of haystacks, she pulled me aside and kissed me.

"Now, was that so bad?" I remember her asking.

All I could do was look into her gray eyes. I finally mustered a response. "I'm not so sure. I think we should try it again to find out."

"Oh, do you?" she said with a smile.

I leaned in this time, my hand pulling the small of her back toward me, and kissed her.

We had gone all summer, flirting with a relationship, brushing hands, leaning close to each other against the balcony rail, 'learning' how to play at the pool hall, but we hadn't committed to a kiss until then. It surprised me. A beauty like Azrael not just consorting with a guy like me, but actually kissing him. It was beauty and the beast but in real life, and I wasn't quite as hairy.

So we kissed. A few times. And that was the first time I was ever kicked out of a museum.

The next day, she packed to head back to Virginia. We took the long train ride into Logan Airport and I sat with her waiting for her plane to be called to board.

"Are you going to visit?" she asked.

"It depends."

"On what?"

"Well, I never invite myself anywhere."

"That was an invitation, you dork," she said, pushing her leg against mine.

The muffled, Charlie Brown teacher voice announced her flight

was ready to board.

“Well, will you?”

“Of course,” I said. “Do you have room for me at your place?”

“Yes, I have my own condo.”

“Really? I’m impressed! You’re only twenty and you already have your own place?”

“I divorced my parents when I was fourteen. The courts ruled that they had to provide a condo for me.”

“Wait, you what?”

The muffled voice called through the microphone again. Last call to board her flight.

“Listen, I’ll send you the address. I live in Virginia, right on the DC line. Just come, okay?”

She gave me a quick kiss on the cheek goodbye, grabbed her carry-on that was laying at her feet and rushed to the airline clerk to hand her the plane ticket.

I watched her go, waiting for her to turn around and give me a cute wave goodbye again, which never came, and wondered if she would have already forgotten about me by the time she landed in DC.

Are you following me still? This is where the story starts.

In Virginia.

With a girl.

A word to the wise young men who may be reading this book – be careful of beautiful women who have an air of mystery about them. There is most likely a good reason they appear to be hiding something. A word to beautiful, mysterious women reading this book – there are actually well-intentioned, very naïve young men like I was, so be gentle with them.

Chapter 1 – the real start of the story

You may have heard this before, but it's worth repeating: The more you weigh, the harder you are to kidnap. Stay safe – eat cake.

It all started with a burlap bag over my head sandwiched between two muscle-head Arabs in the back seat of a black Chevy in Virginia. I was walking to a subway stop to go into D.C. while Azrael was at work when they made their move. It was broad daylight when the car pulled up to the side of the road and they snagged me, tossed me into the back seat and shoved my head into the bag.

The burlap smelled like liquor and throw up and though I couldn't see out of it, I knew there were two guys in the front of the car as well, shouting at each other in Arabic. Or maybe they were shouting at me. I didn't know any Arabic at the time.

"What do you want?" I shouted. There was a muffled response from the driver and I got an elbow to the ribs. My hands weren't tied, but I was no Liam Neeson, so I wasn't about to try to take out the five hundred pounds of muscle I was sandwiched between.

We drove for about twenty minutes. My aunt once told me that people in Massachusetts got their licenses out of Cracker Jack boxes. Following that logic, the driver was from Massachusetts. He was driving like a maniac and I'm surprised we didn't get pulled over by the police.

Being claustrophobic and having never been grabbed and bagged before, I was beginning to panic. I was sweating, but it wasn't because of the heat of the day.

The car suddenly lurched to a stop and I could hear the front doors squeak open. Then a muffled voice from someone outside the car and the back doors opened. I was dragged out the back of the car

and thrown onto the dirt ground on my knees. I was dressed for the hundred-degree August heat typical in D.C., so I had shorts on. The gravel dug into my bare legs. One of them grabbed my hands and pulled them behind my back, forcing me to kneel upright.

“How do you know David?” one of them screamed. He pronounced it *dayveed*, the way I would think it’s pronounced in Hebrew.

I looked up toward the sound of the voice. My momentary lack of response was met with the swing of a wooden board to my chest. It felt like the board was wrapped with something, like wire. I tried to kneel forward, coughing and spluttering into the burlap bag, but the hands holding my wrists behind me kept me sitting upright. They were holding tight, like Indian sunburns in my skin. My chest ached, my arms started shaking. Fear gripped me. I could see nothing but tiny fragments of light dripping through the tightly woven burlap. I could feel nothing but searing pain when I breathed and the heat of the sun. I could smell nothing but faint hints of tequila mixed with strong smells of vomit. It was the heat that was making the vomit smell particularly ripe.

An unannounced swing of the board to my chest again. I suddenly had a good idea how the burlap bag smelled of throw up.

“How do you know David?” the voice screamed louder.

“Who is David?” I hollered back.

Another board to my chest. I spit up blood and as the hands holding me upright pulled me further back, the burlap bag sucked into my mouth. I suddenly wasn’t entirely sure it had been washed out from the last time someone threw up in it.

“You’ve got the wrong guy,” I screamed.

There was a small moment of silence. As if they were pondering the possibility that they indeed had the wrong guy. Or pondering

the best angle to swing the board at next.

“What did he tell you?” The same voice, a different question.

My mind reeled back to the last time I was in Israel. I was volunteering at the International Convention Center. I was there with security for Yitzhak Rabin who was giving a speech. He happened to be assassinated two weeks later. But there’s no way this could have anything to do with that, could it? My only other security details was directing people to the rooms during the convention. Had I talked with someone named David then?

Another swing of the board to my chest and I felt a rib go. The hands holding me back released and I fell face first into the dirt. Sweat poured down my head, into my eyes, my nose, even my ears. The dirt grated into my knees as I put my hands to the ground and slowly lifted myself to an upright kneeling position again, but was met to a board to the back, throwing my face back into the dirt. I could feel the rocks through the burlap.

The next voice I heard was from the guy behind me. No screaming, just a calm, smooth, accented voice. “Just tell us what we want to know.”

I felt dizzy, disoriented. It was a hot day, mid-90s, but my head felt at least ten degrees hotter in the bag. My lips were covered in sweat and every breath felt like needles in my lungs.

“I don’t know a David,” I responded. Did I? I thought back to my time in Israel and came up blank. Maybe he wasn’t from Israel. Maybe they were pronouncing his name that way was because of their accent. Maybe David was an American.

A foot swung hard and kicked me in the chest. The motion tossed me onto my side and another swing of the board hit my back.

“I don’t know any David,” I whispered. I was waiting for a foot to the face. I thought I was tough before, but I’m not. I’m a wimp. If I

had known David and even if it was a national secret, I probably would've given him up.

I could hear the shuffling of feet and some discussion in Arabic. They could have been talking about the weather or their Aunt's meatloaf or a nuclear arsenal and I wouldn't have known the difference.

They could have probably even been speaking English and I wouldn't have understood them. The pain was so real, my chest so constricted, that I could barely hear anything but my heart beat, almost uncontrollably.

"This is the last time," the broken voice said. "We know you know David. They saw him with you. What did he tell you?"

"If I knew who David was, I would tell you. I don't know who you're talking about." I braced myself for another beating, but nothing could have stopped another rib crack from the swing of the board. I sputtered again, curled up into a fetal position, coughing up blood. I had to wheeze to breath. I kept my arms tight to my chest, waiting for just another kick.

I could hear the feet shuffling through the dirt, the car start up and take off. I laid there. It felt like hours, but it may have only been a few minutes. I slipped the burlap bag off my head and tossed it to the ground.

"You forgot your bag," I muttered.

The sun was still shining bright and hot. My t-shirt was covered in sweat and dirt. And blood that had dripped off my chin. I coughed, feeling the blood in my mouth, and my lungs felt like someone stabbed them with every breath I took.

I slowly pushed myself up and saw that I was in a large alley or drive that dead-ended into a brick building. No one was around. Standing up slowly, I stumbled to the main street. I stood hunched,

my right arm down by my ribs.

I had no idea where I was. There were no cell phones then, so all I could do was walk, slowly, aimlessly, trying to get a bearing of my surroundings. Cars drove by. Some stared, but no one stopped. Eventually I hit a road I recognized and ambled back to Azrael's condo.

I didn't tell this part to the FBI when the agent met me back in Boston. I was sure he wouldn't believe me. We'll get back to that soon.

But I did tell Azrael when she got home from work. I met her at the door, shirtless, to show her that the wire wrapped around the board left marks like a grill across my chest and back. She stepped into the condo, set her pocketbook down and just looked at me, like she was examining a piece of boring artwork.

"Well, did you call the police?" she asked.

"I thought that might make matters worse."

"How could it make matters worse?" she asked, stepping forward and putting her hand to my bare chest.

"I don't exactly have any details except for a black Chevy and four Arabs who I can't identify. It's not like they could do anything." I put my hand on hers and moved it. "And careful, I think a few ribs are broken."

"You didn't recognize them before they put the bag over your head?"

Looking back at this moment, what strikes me odd is that she had zero disbelief in the entire event. It was like I had taken a stroll through the park and was telling her about a cute dog that successfully begged me into giving up a hotdog I was eating on a bench.

"Tall, big, dark hair and beards. Not to be stereotypical, but I'm

fairly certain that would describe ninety percent of all Arabic men.”

“Be certain. Be specific.” She looked at me seriously, like I was trying to identify someone she knew.

“Okay, what exactly is going on?”

“Something I should probably tell you,” she said, turning to walk into the kitchen and pouring herself a glass of wine. She poured me a glass as well, even though she knew wine gives me piercing headaches.

“I’m guessing this something is probably a little too little, a little too late.”

She sighed, looked up at me and took a drink from her glass. “Darling, let’s just sit in the living room. And then I have someplace to bring you.”

At the time, I liked the way she would talk. She said *darling* the way I pictured it was said back in the times of Audrey Hepburn.

I left the untouched glass of wine she had poured me and sat down on the couch. As she walked, she started slipping off her high heels.

“Before you, I dated an Arab guy. He was rich and jealous. Very possessive and didn’t want a family.” She gave a weak laugh, recalling the past in her head. “I still remember when I found out I was pregnant. I was so excited. He was sitting in the kitchen with his friends, talking business. I ran in and told him we were going to have a baby.”

She stopped, momentarily, looking at the carpet under her feet, just thinking about the scene in the kitchen. “He said, ‘Take care of it.’ I remember saying, ‘Take care of what?’ And he just looked at me. Like I was an idiot.”

She shook her head and forced a smile. “Anyway, he forced me to have an abortion.”

I watched her walking toward me in her calm, collective manner, talking matter-of-factly, almost separated from emotion entirely. "I'm sorry to hear that. He sounds like an arse."

"That's why I left him," she continued. "Anyway, it's what he did for a side job that this might have something to do with."

She paused, setting her wine glass down and hiking up her skirt a bit so she could straddle me on the couch. She kissed me gently and then sat back, resting her butt on my thighs.

"What did he do...as a side job?" I asked.

"He raised money for terrorists overseas."

I just looked at her, narrowed my eyes. Trying to figure out if this was a load of crap.

"I'm serious," she said, kissing me again and then standing up.

"Where overseas?"

"The Middle East."

"And you knew this?"

"Well, not exactly, but when I left, I came back here to the condo where we had spent a lot of time together. He had broken in and rummaged through my things. When we broke up, I took all his stuff and threw it in storage, but he didn't know that."

"What was he looking for?"

"Well, he asked me where his things were and I told him I threw it all out. He didn't believe me, of course, but that didn't really matter. He had ransacked my place and didn't know I had a separate storage unit."

She swirled the wine in her glass and then took another sip. "That's when I decided to go down to his boxes in storage to find out what he was looking for."

She walked down the hall and into her bedroom. I wasn't about to follow her and get distracted. After a long pause, I finally asked,

“And?”

She talked louder from the other room. “And he left some of his business in the boxes. Not money, just contacts.” I could almost hear her pause, wondering if she should divulge more. “And things.” She came out of the bedroom naked, like it was a natural thing to do and we were living in Europe or were married, then said, “I’m going to shower up before we go.” She shut the bathroom door behind her and I could hear the water turn on.

“Go where?” I muttered to myself.

Chapter 2

Her mystery is how she was calm in the storm and anxious in the quiet.

If you want to read the rest, you'll have to check back soon! Or drop me an email on my contact page and I'll let you know when it's done!