



CLIMBING BY STARLIGHT
by
John Michael Goldman

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PART 1. FIREFIGHTING:

CHAPTER ONE: TIME AND MILES

MILES:

A sultry bus journey from Jerusalem: and dreamlike to the Englishman, cramped in one of the rear seats dozing and resurfacing as his head is jolted; a spine of hairpin turns. Traveller in terror: Eyes bloodshot, watcher of his own secrets, the pursuing past overtaking him in sudden jumbled rushes. Spaghetti chaos. He dare not stop.

Israeli soldiers in battle fatigues, carrying automatic rifles. A mobile phone trills, somebody's mother or girlfriend. Shouted exchange above the engine's deep throbbing: its silencer broken. They are tossed around as the big vehicle rolls and roars and sweeps around U shaped bends and up along the green of the Jordan Valley.

He opened his eyes. The light had altered. A verdant country rolled past him, not the deserts he'd expected, but green slopes, nestling farms and hamlets. He drank thirstily from a water bottle. He drank from a second one as well. Another swallow of vodka to anaesthetise the ghosts- if at all possible. He could be feverish he supposed, but the weather had been so bloody hot that he couldn't say whether it was due to that, or the booze or if he were really unwell. Dream or delirium? He forgot to remember.

Awake again. He looked around the bus, so entirely full of soldiers he wondered if he'd made a mistake at the depot and boarded a vehicle requisitioned for the military. He checked his watch. It showed after seven. He wished that he could stay awake. The half sleeps brought no rest.

The driver went down through the gears as he swung the vehicle round yet another turn. The motion pushed the traveller's face up against the window. High cheekbones and defined jaw-line gave it hardness that was emphasized by a lean body that been shaped whilst he was at university and a rock climbing enthusiast. Over a decade later the muscles at the base of the fingers were still above averagely developed, still good for hanging by. An ordinarily brown skin was darkening quickly under the Middle Eastern sun, and the hair was now streaking blonde, some Viking about him.

“What!”

The soldier from across the aisle was sitting beside him and speaking American English in a

thick Israeli accent.

“You OK? You look like shit.”

Eli confused and wanting to be invisible.

“Something I ate”

The soldier doubtful: Something about this traveller causing him concern.

“Thanks for asking.”

The man rose and crossed the aisle to rejoin his comrades.

“You should see a doctor!” He spoke in Hebrew with the soldier to his left.

He points, and the second trooper glares. Eli doesn't know why they are so bothered. It adds to his feeling of general paranoia.

He straightened in his seat and gazed from the window at a lavish dusk; a red sky, a setting sun and elongated shadows, looked at his watch. It was after 8.00. Although he used to smoke infrequently, in recent months that had changed. He felt he could use a cigarette but he had left behind the duty free cartons on a seat at the bus station.

He thought of asking the soldier but decided not. Maybe the Israeli regarded him as some sort of security risk. He could go without. He had lost so much that not having a cigarette was insignificant.

One of the soldiers' rifles had clattered to the floor of the bus. Eli looked out at the night, marvellous and glistening in the expanse of water that stretched away under the stars . They sped onward.

TIME:

Eli had taken an early tube home after visiting a bar mid afternoon and drinking consolation Vodka. Not his normal way of doing business. But six months work on a new account had just come to nothing. Eric Pauling stingingly critical:

“You got nothing in the pipeline and no likelihood of that changing soon. Am I wasting office space having you around or are you actually going to pull something new in? If so, bloody well when!”

This was Eli's second account collapse in a month.

The deals took so long to put together that he was now looking at what would be a derisory bonus at the end of the coming financial year hence the Vodka. Mary was to be at a Practice meeting

at chambers with an Inns of Court dinner to follow. Tricia would look after Tanya she had said. Eli was after a persistent vegetative evening in front of the telly with a bottle of whiskey. "Turn on, tune in and zone out," he muttered to himself as he turned the key of the front door and opened it. Tricia arrived behind him and Mary was standing in the hall looking smart and fresh. She was good at the Law, and just as good at looking good at the law.

"Tricia, could you see to Tanya's supper as soon as you can. You'll find everything in the Fridge. Just heat it up."

"Sorry I'm late Mrs Sage," said the girl hurrying past Mary. "Busses. I'll do it now."

Mary looked at Eli. "I thought you were off to that LBS thing."

He pulled his coat off. "Change of plan."

She tried to calibrate his mood. Unexpected early arrival; it could be just what this needed. She didn't want to come home to things and have them all out late. Anyway, he wasn't supposed to be here. She had thought they were safe. Erin's opinion of this morning had supported her own worst fears. She would act. Something needed to be done.

"How are you?" Careful edge to her voice; it never used to carry the wariness he heard these days.

"That's an attractive coat."

He's trying to hide something.

Circling domestic cats before a territory fight.

"Are you unwell?"

"It's not been much of a day."

"OK," Mary careful with him, gathering information. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

He shook his head. She regarded him briefly. That's an odd look, he thought.

"I was going straight out, but we can talk now. Change of plan for me. This is important, for all of us Eli."

He had followed Mary into the kitchen and she had put the kettle on. Tricia was putting Tanya's micro waved supper onto a tray. She carried it out towards the dining room calling "Tanya!" as she went. He was not hungry, but he had gone to the big wooden bowl at the kitchen table, taken a vividly red apple and sat down, moving it absently from hand to hand. It's the car, he thought. She really should use her own.

“I’m sorry, but you’re not going to like this Eli.”

Mary leaned against the cupboards opposite the windows. They’d had them custom built when the kitchen was recreated, two summers ago. The cost had been eye watering.

“That would be in line with the rest of my day then. I know, don’t tell me. You’ve pranged the Alfa and it’s a write off. That’s it isn’t it. I forgive you. O.K?”

“Not that simple I’m afraid. Have you noticed that I’ve been having an affair? I haven’t been as discreet as I could. You have noticed, haven’t you?”

“Not the car then. Well that’s a relief.”

“Have you been drinking?”

“A couple. I was being ironic, Mary.”

“I didn’t think it serious to be honest: an amusement, pleasant distraction from the law. You know what I mean? Martin Perry and I have been seeing each other these last six months. To my utter surprise, some days ago, he asked me to marry him.”

This was one of those parts of their more recent life together that Eli managed by not knowing what he knew. At some point over recent years it had been clear that he was not enough for her. Their lovemaking could still have its early electric quality, but he deduced, and usually correctly, that it was because Mary was coming to him fresh from an assignation and was the more passionate because of it: loving him more because she loved him less. He wouldn’t look, she wouldn’t tell, and they’d rub along reasonably well. Slightly Gallic he sometimes thought, but without much of the joie de vivre.

“Well his taste is good at any rate.”

“I’ve really done a lot of thinking about it. To be honest, it shocked me at first. My impulse was to refuse. Martin makes a good case, of course.”

“Well he would do being a Queen’s Counsel.”

“ But his advocacy couldn’t swing it Eli. I thought about us, about Tanya and what’s best for her; the disruption, the costs, the pain frankly; especially for you. But I realised I can’t protect you from yourself. And honestly, I’ve been worrying about you. Something has been frightening me. Anyway we met for lunch this afternoon. I said yes. I’m very sorry Eli, but this is the end for us and I want a divorce. As there’s no easy way to say this, I thought quickest best. ”

He appeared to be listening, but Mary wasn’t certain he’d actually heard her.

“I want custody of Tanya. She’s to live with me.”

Mary was now polarised by her recollection of Eli's beautiful younger eyes that really saw, contrasted with those that looked up at her now. He was not old of course, but it was the young eyes she'd married thinking they shared her vision. And they had. These eyes were very different to Martin's and, they looked lost.

"Well, go on," she said. "At least get angry with me. You're going to anyway."

But nothing much happened. He shook his head, looking back down at the table.

"Are you sure you want this? It'll mess Tanya up, and really, what for? Go on with Martin until you get tired of him. It's probably just a now thing, you know that's the most likely outcome. I won't look, won't ask questions when it's over, and won't criticise. Bygones."

"We have to change. We get one shot at life. I've been taking mine; but you Eli, you? Poor darling."

She shrugged.

"What?"

"Admit it; you're not happy with the way things are either."

"I've had a bad year I know, but that doesn't mean I don't love you. We can help each other over this.

We don't need to be so radical."

"It's not love Eli, it's depression."

"Well Martin isn't love either if you ask me. I'll get back on my feet soon. Martin Perry is not the answer for us. Life giveth and life taketh away and all that, but why him? Why should *he* take you? He's just an amusement is all. Like you said, just a diversion. We're us! Mary and Eli and Tanya, the firm. You know we are. He's not us Mary. He's..... "

"We're insolvent Eli. This is the wind up meeting: creditors and shareholders. We need clear heads and to be businesslike."

Given his muted reaction up to that moment, his sudden outburst of anger startled her.

"I beg your fucking pardon! Businesslike! You're not the fucking Mafia, and this isn't 'strictly business!' You're destroying everything we've built together, for that pompous prat in a powdered wig! What a waste. It's the money isn't it; he's fucking bought you! Martin bloody Perry has fucking well bought my wife!"

"Calling me a whore is not going to help us!"

Now moving from room to room. She picking things and putting them into a case.

“You can pay Tanya’s school fees of course, and her maintenance. Martin and I have discussed all this and actually, the rest will be quite straightforward.”

“Oh really? I wouldn’t be so sure if I were you. Another deal went belly up today, though I don’t suppose that would..... What the hell are you doing with my shirts?”

“We can sell the flat and split the price we get, or you buy me out at an agreed professional valuation. I would call that fair.”

“There’s nothing fair about this! If you’re packing for me, you can forget it.”

“Socks.”

The kettle whistled as the water boiled and she lead them back to the kitchen, poured into a teapot and brought it across to the table on a tray with cups, saucers and a jug of milk from the fridge.

“You know it’s for the best Eli. I have to say this. I have been bringing Tanya up more than you have as well as having the successful career. Most of the money in our account comes from my side these days. Though you’ve always disliked Martin, I think we both know why.”

Pouring of tea.

“Oh really? And why do I dislike Martin then, apart from the fact that he’s a pompous shit I mean?”

“He’s powerful. But had you listened to me I could have taught you strategy. Perhaps me being female is the problem; male fears of powerful women. I’m sorry. I can’t teach you power, even though it’s obvious to me.”

She had not expected to feel so much sympathy for him. Because she knew this was not going to be an easy pill for him to swallow she had been resolved to be as brutal as necessary, to force it down as quickly as possible: But unexpectedly as she watched him, this sympathy. There it was. The weak man she had once mistaken for a strong one was waving his pain at her, in ineffectual objection to this checkmate.

“I don’t mean this unkindly Eli, but you’re just one of life’s plodders. And we need plodders, because after all, where would the runners be without the plodders to overtake? I do think you started out as a runner: you just slowed down as the going got harder. Now, very sadly, you’re hardly going anywhere. I’m truly sorry. All this must be dreadful for you.”

He was mute and ashen faced.

“ And we’ve got a problem with Tanya.”

“That too?”

“I’m uncertain how to say this. I see something you don’t and it could be bad. I’ve discussed this with several professionals I know. Let me put it this way. You’re at a time in your life when you’re looking for consolation, I’m not consoling, and Tanya adores you. We all live together, and I’ve acted in a good few similar cases. It happens.”

“I don’t believe this. You can’t be saying it, much less thinking it.”

“The website really alarmed me.”

“What site?”

“Babylove, if you must know. It’s in search history.”

“Don’t get the wrong idea. The search engine threw it up in a bunch of results. I didn’t know until I clicked.”

“And the others. Babycakes? Babykisses? Plus four others!”

“It was the same search. From when we wanted that thing for Tanya.”

“Thing?”

“You know what I mean Mary. The bloody super doll they all want right now. I’m not responsible for what those search engines give as answers.”

“But you’re responsible for the questions eliciting the answers, aren’t you. I told my pal Erin in Social Services what I’d found. She doesn’t think it was as straightforward as you say. ‘At Risk’ was her phrase.”

“I’m not lying.”

“You may need help. This is it. I’m helping. I’m leaving with Tanya. Eli, it’s this or something worse. I could get a restraining order.”

They were both silent for a beat, shocked by what was happening between them.

“But you know me Mary!”

“I thought I did. I want Tanya to have a strong, uncomplicated, male example. Martin’s good for that. I’m on firm ground there. I’m uncertain about where we’re standing, you and me. The facts combined with our circumstance are worrying. And I hope I’m mistaken. I really do. And if I am, truly I am sorry. I know how it is for parents accused of this sort of thing. But if I’m not, if I’m right, get help now, before it’s too late. We daren’t take a chance on this.”

“I don’t need help. There’s nothing wrong with me! I’m her father, her real father. I’m the male role

model she already has. I am the real facts speaking to you now. Not the one's you're making up as you go! You can't give my daughter away to Martin! He may be the child molester you think I am for all we know."

"Not that Eli. I don't mean you *are*. But I'm not blind and I've seen how these things *can* happen. Something's happening with you."

"None of this can happen. I won't allow it. You go by all means. After what you've said tonight, we shouldn't be around each other anyway. You're right. But the adulteress does not walk off with the child and accuse the father of incest."

"Eli, I only need you out of here a few days. I think that you could overnight somewhere. Of course I agree, we should be apart but it's you that can't stay here. You must see that, surely?"

"I'm staying!" An infant stamping a little foot and sulking, she thought.

"Look, I don't want Tanya to see us like this. For the present, this really had better be my home, not yours. You can move back when we're gone. Friday latest, promise."

"You go. Stay with Martin, if he wants you so much! He's welcome to you!"

"Eli, I'm going to have my solicitor write to you tomorrow and have him bike the letter to your office. It's going to be pretty shocking, so don't read it at work. Just accept what I offer you, and let's all get on with the rest of our lives. Martin and I know the law and what we can do with it. You don't. Please don't make us have to use what we know. You'd hate to find out and I'd hate myself for making you learn. You wouldn't believe how awful it could get, for you darling, much more so than for us. I know you love Tanya, so I know you'll see that what I'm asking you to do is for her good. You do see that don't you Eli."

She left him sitting at the kitchen table with an untouched cup of tea and the red apple before him.

"You can't do this!" he yelled at her retreating back. But she had.

Tanya was in her room watching TV with the sound muted and a pair of headphones on, her Walkman playing. There were tears in her eyes. She didn't see him and didn't hear him. Eli stood still until she did. She was startled and pulled off the headphones.

"Mummy said about Uncle Martin, Daddy. She says you're going away."

She looked unhappily at her father.

"She says it's a surprise for you. Is it?"

Eli's sat down on Tanya's bed rather heavily. He felt his legs had lost the will to remain standing.

"Why?"

"I'm sorry darling. I can see that I'm going to have to for a bit. Mummy will look after you while I'm gone. We're sorting something out. It doesn't mean we've stopped loving you. It's just something Mummy and me think is best just now."

"Are you getting a divorce?" asked his seven year old.

"Do you know what it is?"

"They have them on TV. Miriam's parents are getting one. Is it because of me? On TV they always fight over the children. Miriam says they are fighting over custard of her. Why don't they just make more custard if they like it that much, then everyone would be OK? You could stay here with us. You could have my share if you want. I don't even like custard, so it would be OK if you did. Do you really like it?" She got up quickly. "I'll go and ask Mummy to make some now. "

She ran from the room calling:

"Mummy! Mummy! Can Daddy have my custard?"

Mary finished packing a suitcase for him with all she decided he'd need.

"You're driving me out of our home using Tanya as a shield."

"Not for long. You don't want to see my comings and goings. It will only make you unhappy. Eli, try not to hate me for being right. In the end, I think you'll look back at this and see that I was. I realise it can't look that way to you now, of course not."

He had stayed at a hotel in Eccleston Square. The following evening he bought the letter from Mary's attorneys back there with him. It instituted divorce proceedings and demanded that she have custody of Tanya. It also informed him that Social Services were enquiring further into Tanya circumstances. Eli stared around him at the dishevelled little room and felt he was suffocating.

When Mary had moved herself and Tanya to Martin's white double fronted mansion in Hamilton Terrace, St John's Wood, Eli had returned to the empty flat. He would come in from work around ten at night with a bottle of unopened Vodka in his case and attempt to finish it before it finished him. He would usually awaken on the couch with a hangover, still in yesterdays suit and use alternating hot and cold showers and then coffee after coffee to get himself into some kind of shape for work.

His appearance deteriorated as fast as his chances were vanishing. He looked grey and was losing weight from an already spare frame.

His colleague Tim quipped to others at the office on seeing Eli arriving one morning and struggling from his car;

“Dead man walking!”

His solicitor had strongly advised him to settle out of court on Mary’s terms. The interviews with Social Services were harrowing. At one point he was interviewed by plain clothes police. He now half saw himself as the child molester other people already seemed convinced he was or would become.

“Do as I ask,” said Mary on the telephone one night. “Then we’ll all have some kind of a life. You need space. If you look at this positively, you’ll see that I’m giving you a real opportunity. By the way, Barbara saw you in the street yesterday. She says you look terrible. I hope you’re feeding yourself.

Are you eating properly?”

“Not much appetite just now.”

“I can get Trish to, I mean you can get Trish to come in a few nights a week and make you a meal.

Now just make sure you call her. All our friends are saying that this split is the best thing for us both.

They really love Martin. Tanya does too. I really think that this is all going to work out, for all of us.”

He became a private drunk.

There were the financial obligations Mary had described, and the sense of miserable failure she hadn’t mentioned. But worse, a seemingly endless nightmare with Social Services, and though no charge was brought ultimately, the taint and doubt about him remained on record. He was philosophic about being broke, but not about having little access to Tanya save at Mary’s discretion, and mortified over the implications of having been investigated as a sexual predator of children. The Judge felt that the balance of evidence from Social Services and the Mother’s testimony pointed to her custody being best for Tanya.

Though Mary had threatened to show him what she and Martin could do with the law, Eli had presumed that his compliance with her requirements was to spare him finding out. The conditions set against him regarding Tanya left him believing he’d been completely betrayed.

He had a raft of unanticipated problems and no solutions. And his job performance was further deteriorating. It couldn’t be long before Pauling would confront him, probably for the last time. Should he jump now, before he was pushed?

“Your problem is self pity.”

Eric Pauling sat with his feet up on his desk, the light behind him, pouring through the floor to ceiling window overlooking the square mile, his jacket on a coat hanger. Eli could see it through the mirrored door in one corner of the room that lead to a private bathroom. The Managing Director was revealing his power braces to Eli in a preening display along with the Rolex on his wrist, his glossy black hand-tooled snakeskin shoes, grey silk tie, and hand made white shirt, from his Jermyn Street shirt maker.

“I don’t know why and I don’t care. But if I had seen that in you when I hired you, you would never have got the job. I must have been having an off day. Granted, you once did some good work, particularly on the Oвра account, but even so, your credit lines have run out. I am this close to letting you go.”

Thumb and index finger of his right hand, almost but not quite together, a foot in front of his right eye showing Eli how close to the edge of his job he now stood.

“You got a choice. Take a few weeks, pull yourself together, and come back and win for me. Not just for me either, for yourself. Remember back when? When everything you did worked out? I want that Eli back. This one can piss off. Come back as the old Eli or don’t bother. I’m giving you this one last break. Don’t thank me Sage, just prove me right.”

CHAPTER TWO:

FALLING THROUGH MOONLIGHT

Honeydew moon hanging low over inky water, glittering coolness; fingertip breezes out on the lake: land sweltering. The bus halted throwing him forward, the doors hissed open and he, alone of all its passengers, got out of his seat on impulse and to his own surprise, walked forward. Sandals scuffed the metal floor, and encumbered by his bag, he moved awkwardly along the aisle, squeezing past occasional rifles, and their soldier owners, and slowly down big metal steps. He stepped out and away from the silver sided vehicle. Sticky skin felt grimy and irritated, his eyeballs grainy, stinging