

Second Time Around

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Our 20th high school reunion took place at Villa Mosconi, David's and my favorite restaurant in the Village. I stood in front of the restaurant's heavy wooden door unable to open it, remembering my parting words to David that took place ten years ago.

"It'll be best if we no longer communicate since it tears us apart."

Rena, my best friend since childhood, brought me back to the present when she said:

"Dalia, you need to go in and meet David no matter how painful it's going to be."

"Will he show up?" I asked myself, feeling my heart pounding in my chest as I opened the door.

We walked over to the bar and Rena ordered a glass of Chianti for both of us. I kept looking at the door hoping David would show up. When it opened I had an anxiety attack hoping it would be David. Instead, it was Tamar and Einat, my girlfriends who lived in Israel whom I had not seen for the past twenty years. I hugged and kissed them trying to hide my disappointment and asked myself for the hundredth time if David would show up. While catching up with their lives since high school, I felt somebody was watching me. I turned around and saw David standing by the door, unable to come in.

I stared at him and told myself:

"He hasn't changed at all. He is as handsome as always and the streaks of gray hair make him look more mature and distinguished."

I walked over to him and said, "Hello David, I'm so happy you came."
He gave me a hesitant hug, kissed me and his eyes filled with tears. At this point I could no longer control myself and felt the warm tears running down my own cheeks.

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We grew up in Israel and were high school sweethearts from the age of fifteen. Our parents, who were close friends, were pleased that we loved each other and hoped our relationship would last. My mother, a pretty, outgoing woman, always teased David because he was shy and told him,

"I always wanted a son and now I've got one. When the two of you grow up, Dalia will have the perfect husband who will be her best friend."

At the age of seventeen I was a mature, pretty young woman with long black hair down to my shoulders and deep blue eyes. David was a tall, handsome reserved young man with brown hair and green eyes who attracted the girls' attention but was too shy to do anything about it.

One weekend my parents were away and David came to my apartment to study as he always did. I opened the door, hugged and kissed him and started unbuttoning his shirt. He didn't say a word, stood erect like a Greek statue and looked at me. When I saw his reaction I smiled and told him:

"I want to sleep with you."

My words stunned him. His confused look made me laugh and I said,

“Don’t worry; I won’t get pregnant. Last month I visited the gynecologist and he gave me birth control pills. I knew that my parents would be away this weekend and wanted to surprise you.”

Without saying another word I got undressed while looking into his eyes. I kissed him again and he didn’t move looking at me while I undressed him. David couldn’t take his eyes off my naked body and hesitated for a second before touching my breasts. I felt as if an electric shock went through my body, took his hand and led him into the bedroom. Once we were in bed, he overcame his shyness and a new phase in our relationship began.

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After graduating from high school we were drafted into the army, which is mandatory in Israel for both men and women. We joined the Paratroopers hoping we would be stationed on the same base. The army had a different idea about where we should serve. I was sent to parachute folding school and David, realizing we wouldn’t be together, volunteered to Officers Training School.

After we finished our training we were assigned to two different bases. David was stationed in the north near the Lebanese border and I was stationed in the south. For the next two years we met when we were able to coordinate our leaves. David never knew when he would come home because he often gave his weekend pass to one of his underprivileged soldiers who needed to go home and check on his family. My friends at the base, aware of David’s unpredictable schedule, agreed to exchange their weekend passes with me whenever he was able to get home.

David changed in the army. The naïve, shy boy with dimples in his cheeks whom my mother loved to tease became a mature man with deep lines running down from his nose to the sides of his mouth. I knew he headed a secret commando unit preventing terrorists from infiltrating into Israel but he didn't talk about what they did. On his leaves we slept in the apartment my parents bought for me and he often talked in his sleep. His words were incoherent and his body shook.

One night David screamed in his sleep, "Fire, fire, fire, they're attacking us from the left." I was scared and woke him up.

"Where am I?" he asked, staring at me with a fearful look in his eyes.

"David, it's me, Dalia. You're in Tel Aviv."

"Why did you wake me up?"

"You had a nightmare and screamed. What did you dream about?"

He didn't respond and stared at me.

I pressed my naked body against his and said,

"You must tell me what you dream about. Otherwise it will keep haunting you in your sleep."

The two lines along David's mouth deepened as he debated about whether or not he should tell me his dream. I stroked his body and felt his muscles that were as taught as ropes.

"I can't discuss what we're doing," he finally said.

"You must tell me what you dreamed; it will help you."

David stared at me for a few seconds before he spoke and his voice was hoarse. “The nightmares often occur. What my unit is doing haunts me in my sleep. I’m not proud of what we do but we don’t have a choice. The terrorists cross the border and kill. It’s a holy war to them.”

Determined not to let him get away with the excuses he always used, I told him:

“You don’t have to tell me army secrets but at least talk about the cause of the nightmares.”

“I can’t talk about what we do. It’s classified as top secret.”

David stared at me without saying a word. I patiently waited for him to speak, laid my face on his chest and heard his heart throbbing.

The tears ran down his face when he finally spoke.

“Last week’s mission was to capture a high-ranking terrorist commander deep in the Ba'caa Valley in Lebanon. The helicopters flew just above the mountain tops, below radar range and dropped us at the outskirts of the village. They must have heard the choppers and knew we were coming.”

David's body tensed and he stopped talking.

“What happened?” I almost shouted.

“They ambushed us before we entered the village and killed two of my men. The battle lasted three hours. I lost five more men and had eight wounded. We managed to kill their leader with his six bodyguards, destroy their headquarters and ammunition dumps and kill or capture most of the terrorists. During the fight women and children were caught in the cross-fire and killed. It was a high price for victory. The terrorists were

hiding in the villagers' homes and used them as human shields. The Lebanese government claimed that thirty civilians were killed and one hundred wounded. From the army point of view it was a successful mission. The northern theater general congratulated me, said we had done an excellent job, I'll be promoted to the rank of captain and a letter of recommendation will be placed in my personnel file. I know it had to be done, but I can't live with myself now."

* * *

I was released from the Paratroopers eighteen months before David. Women serve six months less than men and David needed to serve an additional year because he had attended Officers School.

We were having dinner on the balcony of a small restaurant in Jaffa overlooking the sea. The sun, a big orange ball, drifted slowly into the sea giving the illusion it was on fire.

I was surprised to hear David say:

"My commanding officer asked me to extend my service for three more years telling me I have a brilliant future in the army."

"I don't think that's a good idea," I told him. "We planned to study in America after we finished our service."

"I feel guilty about leaving my unit. We've been through a lot together and are good friends."

"David, please listen to me. If you stay in the army your nightmares will only recur and get worse. Let's leave the country for a few years and get away from this

constant war mentality. Before school starts we should take a camping vacation for a couple of months in the American West and visit the National Parks.”

* * *

We flew to New York with a few members of our high school class who had served with David in the Paratrooper battalion in the north. Our other classmates stayed in Israel, studied at various universities or got married and had children. For the next twenty years I kept corresponding with my girlfriends in Israel despite the fact that we took different paths in life.

Everyone in the Columbia University housing complex viewed us as the perfect couple. We lived in a studio apartment with Max, our large male Springer Spaniel and Mandy, the female Dalmatian. Max favored me and played with everybody I talked to in the street. Mandy mirrored David’s reserved personality and always looked groomed as she constantly licked herself like a cat. When they walked in the street she carefully chose whom she wished to say hello to.

In the winter we took the dogs to Orchard Beach in the Bronx. The minute we opened the car door Max jumped out and ran to swim in the ocean. Mandy, excited and full of energy ran on the beach at lightening speed and barked at Max to get out of the water. Max leisurely swam like a duck without splashing water and ignored her. When he finally got out Mandy, frustrated, jumped on him, barked, and gave him a hard time. Max thought teasing Mandy was fun and jumped back into the ocean while she barked her head off, trying to get him out.

On the way home Max shook his wet fur and got Mandy soaked. Unhappy about his being such a slob, she jumped into the front passenger seat and sat on David's lap licking herself dry while Max, sitting in the back, gave her a mischievous look, wanting her to come back.

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Our ideal relationship lasted until we graduated from Columbia University. Because of the intensive studying, our leisure time was limited to weekend visits to Orchard Beach in the winter, spring and fall. In the summer we spent our weekends camping in State Park campgrounds. In order to find a remote campsite by a river or lake we arrived early Friday morning. The sites we chose enabled Max to swim and Mandy to run. When the Park Rangers approached us, I welcomed them, smiled and invited them to have coffee and cookies with us. They enjoyed the visit and when they made a comment about the dogs being off the leash I said:

“We're students at Columbia University and live in a studio apartment on campus. Max and Mandy are active dogs. At night we take them for long walks but it's not enough. That's why we chose this isolated site so they wouldn't disturb anybody.”

Max and Mandy were the perfect “hosts” and sat next to the Rangers who patted their heads while the dogs licked their hands when they got treats. They agreed that Max and Mandy needed the exercise and made us promise that we wouldn't let them roam all over the campground.

* * *

After we finished our Master's Degree programs the relationship started to deteriorate. I received my degree in Biology and got a lucrative job at a large pharmaceutical company. David graduated in Economics and was recruited by Merrill Lynch after they visited the school. I was liked by my clients and excelled in my job. My supervisor, pleased, congratulated me and gave me a large, unscheduled raise.

My "perfect" world vanished when I found myself in difficult situations at business lunches with male clients who made sexual advances after having a few drinks. At first I was able to tolerate these unpleasant episodes, but as time passed it started to affect me.

David and I had dinner at Villa Mosconi when I told him,

"I can no longer take the sexual advances my clients are making. I would like go back to graduate school, get my PhD in biology, and start a new career in the academic world."

David stopped eating and said,

"It doesn't make sense. Why would you want to walk away from such a promising career and start all over again?"

Angry at his response I dropped the subject, not wanting to get into an argument. A few days later I had my weekly dinner with Rena. After ordering a carafe of Chianti and a couple of appetizers, I told her how David responded when he heard about my intention to go to graduate school.

Rena, who lived with Amos, looked sadly at the landscape paintings on the wall before she said,

“David sounds like Amos. Both of them are involved with their careers, not realizing that our priorities in life are different from theirs. I found a two week canoeing and camping trip in the Amazon. Amos will not come because he feels it’s too dangerous.”

I got excited about the trip and told her,

“I’ll come with you and ask David to if he wants to join us.”

Rena laughed bitterly and said,

“David is an investment banker and will feel it’s too dangerous. Amos and I had a big argument about it last night because he told me that I can’t go. I threatened to leave him if he ever tries to control my life again.”

Rena’s words reminded me of my reality. I stopped eating and said,

“You’re right. David wants us to get married and start a family. I don’t want to be tied down with children. We have Max and Mandy. That’s all I need.”

I was pre-occupied through the entire dinner thinking about how our relationship had changed. When we had our desserts I told Rena:

“No matter what David says I will join you. This sounds like the trip of a lifetime. Tomorrow I’ll notify my supervisor that I will be taking my scheduled vacation, but won’t tell him where I’m going. I don’t need him to lecture me about how dangerous the trip is.”

David tried to control himself when he said,

“You must be out of your mind. You don’t know what kind of diseases or parasites you might pick up.”

I felt my face flush with anger before I replied.

“I am going to join Rena regardless of what you say.”

“It’s a bad idea. If you must go make sure you get all the appropriate shots.”

The night before Rena and I left for the Amazon we had dinner at Villa Mosconi when David, who was upset, said,

“I hope you’re aware that if you get sick it might affect your ability to have children.”

His words angered me but I didn’t reply, not wanting to spoil the meal.

The trip to the Amazon exceeded our expectations and we decided to plan another exotic vacation soon. On the flight back to New York, Rena had tears in her eyes when she told me:

“I’m unhappy living with Amos and must decide what I want to do about it. He and my parents are pressuring me to get married and start a family. I don’t want to have children. It will change my life forever. I want to travel and then choose a different career.”

* * *

Three months after we returned from the Amazon Rena called me on a Monday morning and said,

“Are you available to meet for diner tonight? I’m leaving Amos and I need to talk to you about it.”

Villa Mosconi's owner, an old world matron, hugged us and kissed us on both cheeks when we walked into the restaurant.

"I would like to have a quiet corner table that provides privacy," Rena told, her ignoring the warm welcome.

"Is everything okay with Amos?" Not getting a response, she instructed the waiter to leave us alone and only come when we asked for him. Across the room I saw the matron crossing herself looking at us and saying a silent prayer.

"Give us a carafe of Chianti and some appetizers," Rena told the waiter.

"I'll make sure the wine and the appetizers come right away," he responded, seeing Rena's somber look.

Rena got light headed after drinking a couple of glasses of wine without eating and said,

"Last night Amos and I had a big argument when I told him that I don't want to get married and have children. I obsessed about it all night and decided to leave him, but don't know how to give him the bad news."

Upset at not being able to support her and thinking about my own difficulties with David I told her:

"I wish I could help you but I can't."

Rena nodded her head and kissed me. The matron, watching us from a distance, crossed herself again and said another silent prayer.

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The next morning Amos called David and the minute he picked up the phone said,

“Rena decided to leave me.”

“What happened? The two of you were happy.”

“I need to talk to you. Are you available to have dinner tonight?”

David called my office and I wasn’t surprised when he said:

“I’m having dinner with Amos tonight. Rena left him.”

David was upset when he got home, ignored Max and Mandy who gave him a warm greeting, and said,

“Rena left Amos saying she doesn’t want to get married and have children. I don’t understand her. They’ve lived together for five years and had a good relationship.”

His words brought tears to my eyes thinking about my own dilemma and I told myself, *we’re drifting apart. I hope we can work out our differences.* The day after Rena left Amos I had dinner with her.

The matron looked sad when she told Rena:

“Your table in the corner is ready for you.”

Rena’s tears mixed with makeup rolled down her face when she said,

“I had difficulty telling Amos that I’m leaving. I wouldn’t have left if he didn’t insist we should get married and have children.”

“Did you speak with your parents about it?”

“No. I didn’t want to get a lecture from them. By the end of the month I’ll leave for the Far East.”

“How long are you going to be away?”

“At least one year. My trip will start in Tibet; I always wanted to see that country. Wish me luck. I hope I made the right decision.”

It was a sad trip to JFK Airport. I started to cry waiting for Rena to board the plane. Upset, Rena hugged me and said,

“Please don’t cry. I’m finally free from the pressure Amos and our parents were putting on me. I feel that I missed something out of life and don’t want to grow up to be a bitter old woman who didn’t fulfill her goals. Kiss David for me. I hope the two of you can work out your differences. I better leave now before I start to cry.”

Without saying another word she walked toward the boarding gate knowing I was watching her. Rena didn’t look back, just waved her hand as if saying, “*We’ve always loved and understood each other.*”

I was depressed after Rena’s departure and decided to quit my job and pursue my plan to get a PhD. David was on the ‘fast track’ working long hours and preoccupied, he didn’t notice how unhappy I was. Every time I brought up the subject of leaving my job and going back to graduate school he dismissed it saying,

“Why would you want to start all over again? You’ve got a successful career. You’ll face the same issues in the academic world.”

The next morning after having sleepless nights hoping we’d be able to capture the happier days of our relationship, I told David:

“Let’s take a month’s camping vacation and visit the National Parks with Max and Mandy.”

David brooded for a few seconds before he replied.

“I don’t object to you leaving your job and getting your PhD. By the end of the year I will become the youngest partner Merrill Lynch ever had. Let’s get married, go to Israel for our honeymoon and make plans to start a family. You’re not getting younger and before we know it you will not be able to get pregnant.”

At that moment, realizing how far we had grown apart, I told him:

“I don’t want to have a child. It will tie me down and restrict my freedom.”

“You must be kidding?”

“I’m not. I would like to take a three month trial separation that will enable me to evaluate our relationship.”

“What are you talking about? We love each other and have been together since the age of fifteen.”

I didn’t respond, hugged him and buried my face on his broad chest while the tears ran down my face and the makeup stained his shirt. The next day I gave my supervisor a month’s notice and started to plan my cross-country camping trip.

Tormented by guilt about leaving David I told him:

“I still love you but I must decide what I want to do with my life. I’ll be taking a camping trip out West with Max and will leave Mandy with you.”

“Please don’t go. We can work out our differences.”

“I hate to do it to you, but I must go away and get a new perspective about what I want to do with my life. We have different priorities and I need to evaluate if they can be reconciled.”

David didn't respond and his eyes filled with tears. I hugged him and cried, not able to say a word.

Max and Mandy, who looked upset, lay by our feet trying to figure out what was wrong.

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The following week I drove down Route 80 heading West with Max. In order to make sure he would be able to swim, I stayed in campgrounds that were on river banks or lakes. At the end of each day, I called David from the pay phone, shared my daily events with him, told him that I loved and missed him, and asked him to join me.

His response was always the same:

"I don't have enough hours in the day to finish my work load. Please come back. I think we can reconcile our differences."

As time passed I started to get frustrated hearing him say I should come back, get married and have a child.

By the second month, I called David every other night trying to avoid the arguments about not coming back. When I arrived in San Francisco, I felt that our relationship couldn't be salvaged and we needed to part ways. I missed Rena, wondered where she was and wished I could talk with her about my decision. I visualized her walking toward the boarding gate, waving her hand without looking back and heard her voice, *"I feel that I missed something out of life and don't want to grow up to be a bitter old woman who didn't fulfill her goals."*

Our phone conversations were emotional. David asked me to fly back to New York with Max and I couldn't tell him that I had decided to leave him.

"I don't think we can reconcile our differences about having a family," I finally was able to tell David, wondering if I was making the right decision.

For the next few months we kept calling each other every night, not able to separate, despite the fact I knew we couldn't get together again.

One night David surprised me saying,

"I would like to visit you so we can salvage our relationship."

"Please don't. Despite the fact I love and miss you, we'll get hurt if we meet. It'll be best if we no longer communicate since it tears us apart. I was accepted to Berkeley University's PhD program in biology. I love you and hope we can stay friends and not become enemies."

* * *

We stood by the heavy wooden door and hugged each other unable to let go. I wanted to tell David how much I loved and missed him but the words wouldn't come.

Rena's broke the 'spell' when she said,

"Dalia, you and David haven't seen each other for ten years. It would be a good idea if you go to the garden and talk."

Her words woke me up from the trance I was in and helped me gain control of my emotions. Without saying a word I took his hand and walked with him to the garden.

We sat down in the corner under a tree when I told him:

“I was thinking about you everyday, wondering if I’d made a mistake. I wasn’t able to develop gratifying relationships, comparing everybody I met to you. I was involved with the jet set, men who wined and dined me at expensive restaurants and took me on exotic vacations. When they fell in love with me and wanted to get married I ended the relationship.”

David was speechless, realizing I still loved him and said,

“Our last phone conversation devastated me and I ‘buried’ myself, working long hours without time for a social life. I met a woman who was a CPA during dinner at Amos’ home. Six months later she moved into my townhouse in the Village. At first we got along but it ended a year later when she said before she left:

“You still love Dalia and I don’t want to compete with her memory.”

“After I got hurt the second time I wasn’t able to develop meaningful relationships and only had casual affairs, and was told that I would never be able to love another woman.”

David’s description of his life without me saddened me and I couldn’t stop crying. In order to change the subject I asked him about Mandy. His voice cracked when he spoke.

“She died from cancer at the age of twelve. I wasn’t able to put her to sleep. It resulted in her suffering. When the vet told me that the pain killers had lost their affect, I was forced to make the difficult decision and couldn’t get another dog.”

I started to sob when he asked about Max and said,

“At the age of fifteen he developed severe arthritis and had difficult walking. I wasn’t able to let go. The vet begged me to let him die in peace. I finally had to give in when I realized how much he suffered.”

We hugged each other and I cried in his arms. Our friends saw us and decided not to interrupt. After I was able to pull myself together, I told David that I have a new Golden Retriever named Buddy, who takes every opportunity he has to swim in the cold Pacific Ocean and showed him his picture.

David and I spent the entire evening together and it reminded us of happier times. When he asked me if I would consider coming back to New York City and try to live together again, I laughed and said,

“I wondered when you were going to get around to asking. You were always the one who was serious. At the age of seventeen I seduced you into sleeping with me. For the past ten years I was going to call and tell you I wanted to come back. I couldn’t bring myself to do it because you wanted to have a family. I’m the reason behind this party. When Rena came back from the Far East I asked her to convince our girlfriends in Israel to come to New York and combined the 20th high school reunion with my vacation. Rena kept contact with your friends and told me you were unattached. If you hadn’t come to the party, I would have come to your townhouse, rung the bell and said,

“Hello, let’s fly to San Francisco, pick up Buddy and take a month’s camping vacation driving to New York City. I already resigned my job and accepted a position teaching biology at Columbia.”

My words brought back painful memories, reminding us about why we got separated. David kissed me and chose his words carefully.

“Since we separated I kept thinking about the mistakes I made not understanding your conflicts and wished I could turn the clock back.”

We looked at each other and saw the pain we inflicted in our eyes. Without saying a word, we agreed not to repeat the past mistakes that had caused us to drift apart.