

Wisdom of the pretzel

My flatmate's friend came to Israel and crashed at our place. She had a severe food poisoning and seemed to have spent her entire holiday in our bathroom.

Except for the strange blasting sounds I heard every time I went down the hallway I didn't take the whole thing too seriously, because even when I had to go to the bathroom right after she was there I couldn't smell anything because I had just undergone nose surgery and it was, luckily, completely blocked.

Until that week she came to our house, I had lived with a blocked nose most of my life. I wasn't an anosmic, but my nasal bone didn't sit right and blocked a large part of the nasal air passage, so I mainly breathed through my nose.

I decided to undergo an operation to get rid of this annoyance, and it just so happened that the week she was staying with us was the week I was home, recovering from the operation with a totally blocked nose.

As the days went by, my breathing began to improve, but the nose itself was still mostly blocked with post-op fluids. I never knew the human body could produce such things; I was so fascinated by it that every time I'd blow my nose or clear it with my finger only to find some remarkable piece of art in there, it was so beautiful that I had to proudly present it to my flatmate. She laughed at first, then told me to knock it off, and when I didn't she got so angry she stopped talking to me.

The operation itself wasn't such a fun experience either. Because operations aren't fun, as they say. The moment you get to the hospital and start doing the rounds; get a room and a bed and hospital pajamas, you immediately start feeling like a loser. No matter which hospital you're in, even the fanciest of them all, you're still a loser. A piece of nothing, a slab of meat, an animal waiting to be slaughtered.

this process begins when you're lying in bed, in your robe, awaiting your turn to go down to surgery. You're trying to read a book or the paper, but you're uncomfortable, unfocused, stressed. How can you not be stressed when they're about to break your bones, literally, in just a few moments?

But despite all that, you continue playing it cool, with a book in hand, reading the same line over and over for the thousandth time as you're looking around you constantly. Watching, too scared to smile, trying to ascertain the severity of your situation compared to the other patients. Every time you look at the mummies wheeled down the corridor in their sick beds, bandaged to the nines on their way to an operation or coming back from an operation, with absolutely no control of their own condition.

For example, just outside my room, in the corner of my eye I caught a male nurse pushing some mummy on its way to an operation, just as he bumped into a nurse he

must've liked and stopped to chat to her, or flirt with her, to be exact. And the mummy, who could have been a dignified businessman or a well-known author, or a member of parliament, or "just" some Joe Blow, lay down in his hospital gown, a bit blurry from the morphine shot, and waited. He couldn't do or say anything, but even if he could, what would he say? "Take me to the operating room, I'm in a hurry"? So, he just lay there in his baby blue hospital robe, silent. And after a short, giggly conversation, the male nurse and the mummy continued on their way.

After what seemed like forever, a nurse came into my room, just as the patient lying next to me was urinating into a plastic container, to notify me I will be taken away to surgery soon.

I wanted to tell her I can go there by myself, that I don't need to be taken, but she quickly went on to emptying the urine container and disappeared. When the male nurse came to take me, I was moved from my bed to the surgery transition bed. Procedures. Whilst being moved, half of my arse if not all of it peeped from underneath the hospital gown, making me realize there really is no boundary to how small one can truly feel. As we surfed down the corridors and I could hear people around me wishing each other 'good luck', it suddenly dawned on me that if they're wishing each other good luck, it means there is also the possibility of bad luck, otherwise why would they wish good luck?

But everyone I spoke with told me it was just a minor procedure...

The entrance to the operating room seemed like a movie frame: state-of-the-art medical equipment, all sorts of needles and knives, and people in robes speaking amongst themselves in medical terms.

They tried being nice to me, and I tried to answer their small talk questions about where I was from, how old was I, and if I had a partner or if I was married. I tried being friendly and open, so they'll like me and be nice back to me during the procedure. Medical oath or not, it's always good to know doctors take a liking to you, it makes for a friendlier attitude.

When the doctor arrived and suddenly remembered he'd forgotten to pass on an important message to the Head Nurse, I panicked. I wanted him to show up cool, calm, collected – after all he's about to cut my face open, but instead, he arrived anxious and worried. He sent a nurse to quickly pass on his message before the secretary goes home, and all I had left to do was to pray she'll come back with good news and calm him down.

During the surgery and under the local anesthetic, I could hear them drilling through my brain. The surgeon pounded, **sowed**, and broke every nasal bone I had. Moving about from side to side, grabbing a hammer and a putting back a pair of pincers, inserting tampons into my nose and pieces of iron into my brain, whilst I lay there in my hospital gown, connected to millions of scary-looking medical machines, and

prayed. In that moment, no matter how big an atheist you are, you realize you're nothing. One small human error, and you're gone. So you start praying, suddenly you're a believer.

And now I'm at home, with my nose still half blocked, showing my flatmate other divine-intervention, fluids-based artworks, dancing down the hallway to the sounds of her friend's disco beats. One morning I sneezed so strongly I spat out whatever can of worms I had hidden up my nose. I ran to the toilet and wiped off whatever came out.

For the first time in my life, as I was leaning over the toilet, I took a deep breath and felt the air of the world flowing through my nostrils and into my lungs. It was the most amazing feeling in the world, only the memories of my flatmate's friend, who visited the toilet only a short moment prior, still haunt me to this very day...

BERBALE

I was at a funeral today.

Yoav went to work

Nirit went to university

Gilad sat his psychometric tests

My sister is in America

Ilan sat with his work colleagues at a café and laughed

Ronen had a tough day at the office

And Dikla's brother died.

I went to the funeral. I had no doubt I wanted to be there. Wanted, not needed.

It was a recurrent question my parents used to ask each other: "do you think I should go to so-and-so's funeral?..."

The answer was always the same – "whatever you feel is right for you". Or in other words, make up your own mind, I can't advise you on the matter.

On the way to the funeral I thought of a few scenarios of how my first meeting with Dikla was going to go. My first true love. My **only** true love.

Me and Dikla, who also goes by the name of Barbarella, met, believe it or not, at a blind date. A good friend of mine said there was this gorgeous girl who works at the

hotel with him, who he wanted to introduce me to. I believed him. I mean we all have different tastes, but his record was so impressive that I thought the worst-case scenario would be if a seriously hot woman came along, only she wasn't my type. On top of that the guy was a happily married, successful businessman who meant what he said, because if he wasn't like that, why would his friend be like that? Turns out he chased her for months to get her approval, until she finally cracked under the pressure and gave him her number. He passed on her number and said "listen, don't ask too many questions, I'm telling you we're talking about top quality here".

He made it sound as though he had it all premeditated and worked out, and all I had to do was show up and grab her. He already laid down the land and told her about me, praised and lauded my name. All I had to do was simply show up and sweep her off her feet.

Before such human transactions, there is a sense of excitement, or dread. You want the phone conversation to go smoothly, with no awkward silences. So, I had to choose whether I act directly and go "I'm Golan, I got your number... do you want to meet up today?" or take the more distant phone acquaintance approach of chatting about fields of interests, her job, hobbies, and everything else she's into right now, which no one really gives a shit about at this early stage. This kind of tactic though comes with the risk of the conversation turning into a trail of mundane questions such as "where did you spend Passover Eve?" or stories about traffic jams and aerobics classes, whilst you'll need to show interest and nod in agreement; quite an effort when you don't really know the person.

If, however, you still do choose to use this tactic, then you have somewhere between five to ten minutes where you need to be at your absolute top form. You need to be deeply focused, in total listening mode and draw your conclusions so fast you could pull out the right answer exactly at the right moment. You can't miss; you snooze – you lose. The irony in those situations is that you need to convince the girl to meet you, as if she's not at all interested in meeting you. Like a sweaty salesman trying to prove the advantages of his products over his competitors', and she's the CEO he's trying to persuade. Suppose you were at your best and managed to make her laugh (but not too much so she still takes you seriously), spoke clearly and convincingly and made a good impression (but not too good otherwise you'd may come across as arrogant), and suppose the lady was available and didn't have to babysit her aunt's children or go to a café gathering with her friends and was feeling well and didn't even have a headache – this is your time then. You got extra time – at least an hour according to the basic rules of common courtesy, in which you will have to prove you're a winner, or at least motivated to become one, a serious guy – one you can lay your head on his shoulder (as they say), and... generally it would be

enough, especially if you date a woman over the age of twenty five who sees you as her future husband on the first phone call.

So, I decided to make the call. I sat down by the phone and dialed the numbers, then hung up as soon as I heard it ringing. I wasn't in the right mood for it and waited for a momentary elevation of the spirit to make me feel like I'm the funniest, wittiest guy around. A moment inspired by a good song on the radio, or a successful chat with a lady friend; a moment in which I will feel so confident I will call without hesitating for a moment, without thinking it through. The thing is, that usually what happens to me is that I want to be at my best so badly that I find myself calling when I'm at my absolute worst – tired, heavy and slow. I keep putting off making the call and, in the end, when I have nothing to lose, when I'm as low as low can be, then I make the call.

She answered.

"Hi, I'm Golan, Yoav's friend, he gave me your phone number..."

"Oh, yes, hi, how's things?"

"Good, how about you?"

"Good, just reading an article about blind dates".

"Yeah? Do they have some new and useful information?"

"It says the chemistry with the partner is determined in the first three seconds of the date, and they also have a blind date do's and don'ts list, and some other crap".

"Is asking you what your plans are for this evening ok by their rules?"

"It's a tad fast, but it does follow the rule of being direct and down to the point, not get into long phone conversations, be spontaneous, exude confidence. But it's not really fair because you probably read all these rules in the paper" she continued being a bit cynical.

"Do I seem like a guy who would read the rules in the paper?" I said, sounding condescending and offended at the same time, and while she was beginning to think 'god what a moron, he's taking it way too seriously, getting offended and all, zero confidence' I added "I don't make one move without the book of rules are you kidding me? The paper?"

We laughed.

"Well, if you're that knowledgeable of the rules, then surely you know I need to politely refuse your offer at this stage, because this is the first time you approach me and I need to play hard-to-get, independent, not clingy, running a busy schedule etc.".

"Well, sometimes you don't have to play by the rules, you know..."

"But you went by the rules, so I have to continue down this path. If I deviate we'll encounter a few difficulties down the track, which I'm trying to prevent".

"Okay, no worries, I'll change my tactic then – how do you feel about sex on the first date?"

"I feel great about it", she said.

"So what are we doing tonight?"

"I'm coming over aren't I?"

I didn't know if she was serious or not, because I've met so many messed up women in my life that you really never know, but luckily, she continued on and said, "truth is I can't meet up today, let's talk tomorrow".

"Back to the rules" I laughed – "decisive, assertive, not faffing about, knows what she wants, and follows one of the most important rules: always be the one to end the conversation".

"Wow, you really are well-versed in the rules".

"You thought I was joking? About the book? I was dead serious".

Now she really didn't know what to think. 'Perhaps he really did read the book?' I heard her mulling over the thought, and preferred to hold off answering the question, to evoke curiosity and a sense of mystery about me as we headed towards our meeting.

"So, we'll chat tomorrow" I said, stealing the right to end the conversation off her.

"It's not gonna work", she said. "I'm the one who ended the conversation, it's already been noted in my favour".

"Noted where?" I asked.

"At the Population Registry... what do you mean where?".

We giggled a bit, and then I didn't know what to say.

"So, I think we'll talk tomorrow" she said with an air of self-importance.

"Okay, so bye for now".

"Bye".

That was our first phone call.