

Chapter 40: My sister, Sylvia

One weekend, at the beginning of March 2004, my sister Sylvia called from Haifa: "I'm very worried about you, I was thinking about your plans—." She was referring to our recent decision to move to Iowa.

"No need to worry Sylvia. The change will be good for Heidi and me, we need it. We have visited the place and like it very much. What's wrong with spending the end of one's surgical career in the country?"

"I'm just afraid that you won't be satisfied in a non academic environment, that you'll be miserable, and what will Heidi do in that little shit hole?"

"Sylvia, listen. We have considered everything and we are convinced that the step we are taking is wise, so don't worry—."

"But I do worry, I worry about you..."

A week later, Sylvia was found dead on her living room carpet.

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Until this point, I have hardly mentioned my sister in these pages—I simply did not know how and what to write about her: she was a complex and problematic person and our relationship, although not devoid of love, was as unpredictable as a major emergency abdominal operation for trauma.

"Alone. One has to learn to live alone.

To live alone. Because man dies alone.

He dies alone. But I can't alone.

I'm afraid. And this winter frights me.

The sea is so rowdy. And everything comes to me from the sea."

This was written by the twenty-year-old girl some thirty six years before her death. We found her diaries and pieces of poetry in her cozy apartment on the Carmel Mountain. They were scattered here and there among thousands of history, art, travel, cooking books, and literature. A few volumes of diaries were found among hills of clothes, expensive shoes, and perfumes, many still laying in their original shopping bags from London, Paris, Munich and even Haifa. One volume —the most recent one—was found

hidden by her bed, as if waiting to receive the last words she had been planning to write. We did not manage to discover her early diaries, from her high school years. I knew about their existence—as a ten year old boy, I had been reading from them in secret, curious to learn about the love life of my older sister. Did she destroy them? Why?

Sylvia was just three years older than me, but the generational gap between us had been much wider. She had matured much earlier, and had a sharper intellect than I; she had excelled in school—while I had been considered “retarded”; she had shined in Haifa’s upper crust young society, while I had remained shy, awkward, and plain. Since her early teens, she had played the role of the “princess”, always best dressed, extravagant, ever exchanging boyfriends—who were significantly older than her—and commonly (as we learned from her diaries) manipulative, jealous and not wholly content.

The final entry in the last diary had been dated July, 5, 2003:

“Haifa. Nothing is changed. Just when I think that it is all finished he arrives and then I do not need anything else. When he is with me I love him as I did not love anyone. I worry about him like about a small boy. Sometime in bed I do not know when my body begins and his ends. I simply love his body like no other man I had loved before. I’m going out of my mind if he doesn’t call for a few weeks. I don’t trust him...and now he doesn’t reply to his cell phone and I don’t know what to do. God! There is no minute without a worry. How can one live like this? But when we are together it is wonderful! In the last few weeks I was depressed to death. He didn’t call. I felt completely dead. At least he provides me—and he’s the only one—the taste for life.”

Thus ended her last diary. It was lying on the carpet by her bed in its red leather binding. The bed had been uncovered—was she intending to go to bed the night of her death? But what happened? In the morning, when her cleaning lady entered the apartment, she found Sylvia laying face down on the carpet in a small pool of clotted blood, in the little space between her easy chair and the coffee table, which was topped with heavy glass, and loaded with students’ manuscripts awaiting corrections. The ashtray was full with half smoked slim *Vogue* cigarettes—she used to chain smoke them but

never to the end—and a half empty glass of white wine. She had been last seen by a neighbor, late evening, on the staircase, dressed in elegant evening attire. She had exchanged a few pleasantries with the neighbor; but from where was she returning so elegantly dressed? We never found out. And what had happened after she climbed to the third floor and unlocked the heavy door of her apartment, entering the corridor leading into the living room? First she probably had kicked off her fashionable high heels, removed her black plush satin jacket and leather handbag, hanging it on a nearby chair. Next she poured herself a glass of white wine—not an expensive *Golan* or *Galil* wine, but something cheaper, made by the *Carmel* winery. We found the almost empty bottle in the kitchen. Did she have something stronger? Probably not, as no open or empty bottles of Whiskey or Brandy, her favorites, were to be found. Had she been consuming drugs? There was no evidence for this except some *Valium* lying around. Next she surely lit a cigarette and sat in her favorite easy chair, her legs in dark, silk stockings folded under as usual. Did she then start reviewing her students' manuscripts or did she watch TV? Did she look at one of the magazines or novels scattered around? And what happened next?

There were conflicting testimonials from Sylvia's acquaintances on her prevailing mood during the few months prior to her death. Some claimed to have noticed her to be in a good frame of mind: she had been planning overseas trips, was writing articles and finishing books, and only two days before that fateful day she had been spotted power walking in designer sport attire along the Panorama Street. And most friends maintained that Sylvia had been extremely satisfied after finally receiving her long awaited professorship—she loved the sound of 'Professor Schein'. Other argued differently, that the disappearance of Hardy had devastated her. Hardy was her last "major love" in a lost list of "major", "minor" and "sporadic loves." In one entry of her diary (October 10, 2001) she had listed them in two columns as the following:

“Finally I decided to list all of them. Of course I can’t remember everyone, let alone remember their names. For some I will only list the nicknames I’d given them:

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|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Izi Shtadlan | Henri |
| Mr. Cinema | G. Winter |
| Mr. Shira | Jacque |
| Shlomo Avineri | H’ |
| The son of Mrs. Beit Belgia | P’ |
| Womotzik | Adolf the German |
| England A | S’ |
| England B | Ari (?) |
| The American with the cooking book | Shaul |
| Hans Abhard Myer | Tedi |
| Advocate Y. Guri | Avi |
| Yosi Ben Bassat | Natan |
| Doron Mendels | Gad |
| Hayim Goren | A’ |
| Avi Reches | Gisi |
| The philosopher from Haifa University | Zeev M’ |
| Moshe Adler | Zeev Kessler |
| Romanm the Polak | Karol |
| The neighbor | The French, Political Studies |
| The insurance agent | Mrs. Woks’ son |
| The mafioner | The flower shop owner. “ |

Some of the above I had known personally, a few I had heard of; and few were a total surprise to me. Many of them feature, or are mentioned in her diaries, the diaries that served as a window to the life of a sister— the inner life of a sister that, now I realize, I knew so little about; or did not care to know?

After graduating from high school and having served in the army, the “princess” –who had already declined marriage proposals from serious candidates (Tedi, Zeev M’) embarked on a North American tour with Henri, a rich Canadian Jewish boy whom she had met in Haifa on the beach. It had turned into a “big love”, leaving her heart broken when Henri’s mother had vetoed her son’s decision to marry the “spoiled Israeli girl”. Her next station had been in Jerusalem, as a junior student at the Hebrew University. Here the externally mature but internally confused girl romanced mostly with married lecturers or famous professors: one (A’) had impregnated her, paid for her abortion, and immigrated with his wife to the USA. Another was Professor Shlomo Avineri –a leading academician and politician. Some time later she had fallen under the spell of the charismatic and internationally renowned expert of Medieval History, Professor Joshua Prawer (P’). He, more than thirty years older, had become her mentor and guardian and she his mistress. “That old Jew will ruin her life,” my father had predicted before his death, moaning about the affair his daughter had been having with the notable professor—and his prophecy turned out to be correct. The symbiotic relationship between the two would endure for many years during which she could have married and had a family. With Prawer’s connections, Sylvia had gone to the University of Cambridge, England (lovers England A and England B; Prawer had been visiting her frequently) where she obtained her PhD. When she had returned to Israel, Prawer, not wanting her too close to him in Jerusalem, helped to place her at the University of Haifa. Here she had been recognized as a competent lecturer and a prolific researcher, and over the years gained an international reputation as a Medieval scholar. But being known as Prawer’s protégé had been politically harming and, consequently, her professorship was repeatedly postponed. During the 1980’s, she had enjoyed a steady and prolonged relationship with an older man named Shimon (S’) and this had a stabilizing effect on her (there were no entries in the diaries during those years). The diary had been resumed after S’ premature death of lung cancer: “S’ served me like a drug, like cognac, wine

and cigarettes. He was very effective...the first man in whom I had an absolute trust...".

Following Shimon's death the diaries document years of depression and instability exacerbated by our mother's terminal disease, with which Sylvia had not been able to cope. And as always she had been attempting to cure her inner maladies by wine and leading a luxurious life style, which was beyond her relatively modest academic salary. And of course, there was a relentless search for the elusive love, and when there was no love there was sex (see list above). While most women in their fifties complain about decreasing sexual appetites, with Sylvia, as her diaries show, the situation was extremely reversed.

But who was that Hardy, whose name crowded her last few diaries and who was mentioned by her friends as "her great love"? Sylvia had been keeping her personal life and affairs well compartmentalized—sharing only bits and pieces, with selected people—and she tended to be secretive—also about Hardy. It appears that she had met Hardy by coincidence in the late 1990's in Haifa. He was Dutch-German, married and father to two daughters, and three years younger than Sylvia. Some said that he had been working for the international Red Cross and later was involved in some obscure international commerce. One girlfriend had seen Sylvia and Hardy together in Haifa a few months prior to Sylvia's death. Another claimed hearing from Sylvia about Hardy's recent financial troubles. Sylvia's neighbor (the "neighbor" from the list) told me that Sylvia had asked him for a loan of 20,000 US dollars "in order to pay off a loan"—did that money go to Hardy? (I had eventually to pay back the neighbor with Sylvia's new Toyota Corolla). Did Sylvia also try to procure money for Hardy from a member of Haifa's underworld (the "Mafioner" in the list)? There was another reason why Hardy seemed to be responsible for her recent financial troubles: she used to fly around Europe—Barcelona, Zurich, Munich, Paris, only to spend a night or two with him--hotels, food and drinks always paid by her. Was Hardy involved with other such "Sylvias" in various corners of the world, where he had loved them for a few days, a few times per year? We will never know:

there was no real trace of Hardy in Sylvia's documents or laptop—not even a phone number or e-mail address—only long entries in her diaries raving about his sexual performance. Did he disappear with her money? In 2006, two years after her death (where was he until then?) Hardy e-mailed the Haifa University; it was forwarded to me: "Dear Sir, when returning from an exhausting two year mission abroad for my country a couple of months ago, I was told that Sylvia isn't with us any more. A major shock to me, as I have been a close friend to her for many years; although not seeing her that often." I exchanged a few e-mails with Hardy (his second name turned out to be Sehrt) who wrote back "Yes, Sylvia she played a major role, I owe her an unforgettable time in my life..." but never really disclosing much more.

So why and how did Sylvia die? Was it suicide? Very unlikely—why would she dress up and go out? And she had so many plans, and there was no physical evidence. Was she murdered? The investigation by the police was hasty and an autopsy was not performed. But there was no need for much physical force to place a hand on the mouth of this petite woman and stop her breathing. Was that the so called "mafioner" who did it—when asking her to return his money? Or did he push her causing her to fall and hit her head on the edge of the coffee table? Or was it just an accident: did she try to stand up from her easy chair and slip on the carpet, hitting the table? Obviously, one cannot rule out a natural cause of death: a cardiac event which would not be completely unlikely in a fifty six year old lady who was a heavy smoker, and receiving hormonal replacement therapy.

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On a windy early spring day we buried Sylvia in the "new" Haifa's cemetery (the "old" one, where our parents are resting, had run out of space) on a rocky hill overlooking the Carmel Mountain. An Arab village is plastered to the other side of the hill, and goats were roaming at the cemetery's perimeter. According to the local tradition, the burial attendants unveiled Sylvia face, which had been covered with a white shroud, for me to identify. I saw the face of my pretty sister, now blue and bloated—dead. "Here, take it," said a bearded attendant snatching a tiny, golden medallion

still hanging on her neck. I stared at her face, trying to absorb her last image, but the attendants re-shrouded it instantly. Isn't it a pity that the last image of our dying or dead dear ones is the prevailing one?

Sylvia and I could not be considered as "close siblings": she was often distant, aloof, arrogant and very moody—the smile turning into a tantrum in an instant, and this always kept me on guard—remote and reserved. Most probably she had been jealous of me—mainly of the children that I have and she, so desperately wanting them, having none—but also jealous of my stable marriage and relative, late, financial affluence. Nevertheless, there was mutual affection and warmth between us and we made a point of talking on the phone a few times per month. But the few well-written and shocking volumes of diaries, exposed to me the real sister—the woman tormented by demons with which she was relentlessly struggling to cope. That despite her beleaguered self—crying and drinking for long nights—she could rise in the morning, get dressed, and put on a face of a successful academician, and stand in front of a large class of students—is admirable to me.

Whatever the actual cause of death was, chronic loneliness and painful craving for love, must have been contributory factors. Fifteen months prior to her death Sylvia had written in her diary:

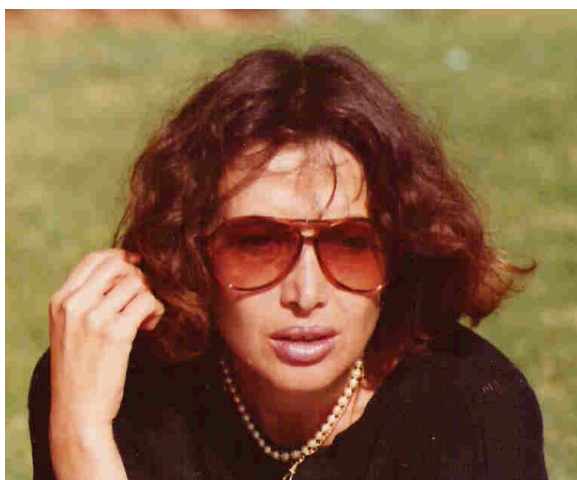
"And I walk in Panorama Street and see all these couples hugged together. All ages. And the women sometimes fat, neglected, ugly. And I ask myself what is the use for all of this? Where am I and where are they? They have a piece of man that cares and loves. And me—alone. Always alone."

Sylvia has left behind a large body of historical research, including two full-length books "The Papacy, the West and the Recovery of the Holy Land" (1991) and "Gateway to the Heavenly City: Crusader Jerusalem and the Catholic West" (2004). To me, however, her diaries, if properly edited, could be her best work. But the best work of authors often never sees the light...

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Poland



Haifa

[More pictures below](#)





Sylvia, a month before her death (last time I saw her)



**The Library, Tel Hai Academic College, the Upper Galilee
(to which her vast historical book collection was donated)**