

Jane

By Yael Zeiri

I first met Jane on June 1st. She was one of three recruits sent to my unit. Usually, new recruits spent about two months in “the small room”, learning, and immersing themselves with all the new material, information, and, well, mostly math that was a prerequisite for moving on up to the “big boys club”, where we worked on intelligence and classified materials. The newbies who were usually sent over were well-groomed 18–22-year olds, coming out of gifted programs, most extremely brilliant; they were also somewhat detached and standoffish. Jane, on the other hand, was inquisitive and kind. I could see her eagerness to learn.

On June 10th we had our usual monthly group meeting and Nathan, who acted as the newbies full-time instructor, mentioned Jane stood out from the group. I took out her file and sat down to go through it, then printed out one advanced math riddle, and headed towards “the small room”.

I could have taken the car but decided in favour of walking. I knew it was best to keep my body moving as much as possible and by and large enjoyed the walk between the rooms. When I got there, I handed Jane the riddle. She was surprised but recovered quickly and allowed me to observe as she moved around numbers and found the right answer. I was impressed.

The next day, I came carrying a real cryptography problem for her. I set it on her desk, and she looked up at me.

"A challenge," I said.

"Accepted," she replied, a smile flickering across her face. It was by coincidence that I had to stop at the small room later that night to pick up a file and saw her still sitting at her desk, alone.

"Jane," I said, "what are you doing here? It's almost midnight."

"I'm so close to solving it," she said tensely. I walked closer, then sat next to her, "Listen. This is important. One of the first rules of the big room is that you must take care of yourself. No one goes around and tells you that it's time to sleep or eat or do some physical activity. If

you want to be good at this brain stuff, Jane, and I think you already know that I believe you have potential, you must take care of your body. Understood?"

During the weeks that followed, I slowly became aware we were forming a habit. Every evening after dinner, I would stop by "the small room" and she would be there, working.

I told myself it is on my way to the office in any case, but what did she tell herself? I do not know. Is it possible she was waiting for me?

"You're still working?" I would call out,

"I'm so close to finishing," she would always remark, and that was my cue to sit by her and suggest this and that. The dance we created was gentle and relaxed. No one around us, I enjoyed being the teacher, the mentor. She refined her role as time went by, asking sheepishly quiet but highly intelligent questions, smiling, blushing every time I commended her. I found myself awaiting those fifteen minutes until I stood up and excused myself, as I had to get back to my duties.

On July 1st I called Nathan to my office and asked for his opinion regarding Jane. Should we move her to "the big room"? Is she ready? He was all for it. We agreed on a trial period. That evening, I set off to the small room to find Jane. I found myself lingering in the hallway, looking at her. She was hunched over her desk, a position we were all guilty of. Since I was sure she did not notice my presence, I allowed myself a detailed gaze at her. She was dressed informally, as were most of the civilian staff in the unit, blue jeans, and a sweatshirt, sitting crossed legs on her chair, she changed her leg position every few minutes. Was she nervous? She lifted one hand and started biting her nails. It seemed intimate. Maybe I shouldn't be watching.

"You're still working?" I called out, playing out my role. She jumped up. Was she not anticipating my arrival?

"I'm stuck." Her answer bewildered me. It had a different tone to it, sadness? Angst? Despair? I walked down and sat on the wooden chair next to her.

"It happens" I said, stretching my left leg a bit.

"I hate it", she shot back as she lifted her gaze.

"What have you tried?"

"What do you mean?" she said, her eyes fixed on me.

"I mean, besides sitting at your desk for hours. What have you done differently to get unstuck?"

"I've never had to do anything differently," she said quietly, "The answer always come ups at the end." I paused for a second, then pushed the chair back and got up.

"I'm pleased," I said. "I think this means we finally challenged you".

She allowed a small smile to form on her face.

During August and September Jane finally found her stride. I found myself intrigued by any piece of information about her, her interests, hobbies, childhood. Communication between us was not one-sided. I was less reserved around her, and though we had nine years between us, our conversations soon became meaningful. One evening, I was working on a status report to headquarters when Jane came into the big room. She had spent hours lately working on asymmetrical encryptions. An hour passed before she got up and stood by me.

"Shouldn't you go home?" she said.

"I don't know if I'd call it a home," I told her. Then baffled by my candid outburst, I added, "I'll go soon."

"You need a dog to call it a home," she replied as she sat down next to me.

"I had a dog back home. He died right before I enlisted in the Marine Corps."

"The Marines?" she asked, her voice high pitched.

"I enlisted the summer before my senior year in high school," I replied. "Always wanted to be a pilot."

She nodded.

"I served for three years and 32 days. Then, well, there was a training accident, and I couldn't continue." Her eyes widened. "They wanted me to leave the army, but I resisted, so they tested me and allowed me to join the intelligence community."

I allowed her to take on her first solo encryption around mid-September, and by October she was pulling her own weight. She joined a team assigned to innovation and process betterment and helped to identify new techniques and workflows.

On Nov 17th she asked to show me an idea she had for asymmetric encryptions. I'd never seen a similar technique. It seemed like we struck gold.

A few days later I picked her up, near her housing complex, as we were heading to HQ to show some of the higher-ups her new method. We spent some time talking about the weather, the offering in the dining hall as of late, and more mundane chit-chat.

"I was just wondering," she said suddenly. "About your leg."

"That's the result of the training accident I told you about," I said "It was a helicopter crash, my left leg was shattered to pieces. They managed to save it, but it's still..."

"Very painful?" she interjected.

"Mostly metal, I intended to say".

I didn't speak about my injury often. The only people who knew about my daily struggles were the ones who asked: my doctor and physical therapists. Even my parents strayed away from conversations about my leg. It happened, I rehabilitated.

"If I stay active, go to the gym or swim and walk every day, I'm usually fine," I concluded. No point in telling her more.

I could feel her eyes on me. "I'm so happy you got out of there alive." She said softly.

I felt my grasp of the steering wheel tighten.

On the morning of the 15th of December, I was in my office when the phone rang. It was Jane, sounding weak. She told me she had a fever and apologized for not being able to come to a meeting we had scheduled.

Around 14:00, I took my car and drove to the main kitchen. I was sure they would give me some soup for Jane although lunch hours were already over.

When I got back to the car, I tried calling Jane, but she did not answer. I'll just drop the soup and go, I told myself. As I climbed slowly up the stairs to her apartment, I hoped Jane wouldn't see my visit as intrusive. I knew a relationship with Jane was impossible. She was 22 and I was 31. I was her officer. It was wrong to even think of it. Nevertheless, here I was, standing outside her door, with chicken soup. A walking cliché.

I knocked on the door. Nothing. I touched the handle; the door was unlocked. I walked in. "Jane" I called out. "It's Officer Shein. I came to bring you soup."

I do not know what drove me to peek inside her room, but I did. She was lying in her bed, sleeping. "Jane?" I whispered. Was she OK? I walked closer. She didn't look well. I touched her. The warmth of her body startled me. She was burning up. To my relief, she opened her eyes. "Jane it's me, Officer Shein. I came to see if you're OK."

"I am," she said, "It's just a fever."

Her eyes closed slightly, and I could hear my heart beating faster. Perhaps I was reading the situation wrong? Is this an emergency? I wasn't convinced. She is conscious and breathing, I told myself. I went to the bathroom and returned with a wet cloth to put on her forehead.

"Jane," I said, "I want you to drink some water."

She nodded, then sat up, her face twitching. Was she in pain?

"Where's your thermometer?" I asked.

She pointed to her dresser, and I handed it to her. The thermometer tinged revealing a temperature of 102.4 degrees. "We have to get your temperature down, now," I said. "I'm taking all the blankets off you, and you have to change into something lighter."

"Did you take any Tylenol?" I asked.

"An hour ago. I'll be fine, Officer Shein" she said faintly, "you can go back. Thank you for coming to check on me."

"I'm not going anywhere," I replied, then opened her closet doors and found Jane didn't have many clothes. Another similarity between us. I grabbed a short blue t-shirt and a pair of shorts

and handed them to her. Jane started lifting herself of the bed, her movements slow, calculated.

"I'll step out for a second," I said, walking into the corridor. Suddenly I heard a large thud from her room. I raced in, finding her on the floor, her pants half on.

"I lost my balance, I'm fine," she said, her voice panicky. I came closer, intending to help her up. I immediately saw the wound on her inner thigh. The whole area was red and swollen, parts of it yellowy even. It took me a minute to see what was yet to be seen: her entire right leg was crisscrossed with cuts and scars. Some small and whitish, some larger or red. I looked up at her.

"Oh my God," I whispered.

"No!" she cried out, "go away!"

"I'm taking you to the E.R." I said frantically.

"No. I can't go to the E.R.," she said, her voice breaking.

"What do you mean?" I replied, trying to find Jane's gaze. She was looking down.

"I do it to myself", she said quietly. "It's called cutting. Self-harm."

My breath stopped. I looked at Jane. She stood up, still unsteady. Holding the bed, she finally managed to take off her long pajama pants and put on the shorts I gave her.

"I always use a sterile pad afterward, and I change the blades." She spoke slowly, "but I guess something went wrong this time." She sat on the bed, "I have antibiotics in my medicine box, just in case. I should probably start using them."

I was shocked by the day-to-day manner she was speaking in.

"OK," I said cautiously, "Let me know where that medicine box is, and we'll start from there."

Two hours later, her temperature was 101 and I was able to breathe again.

"How long has it been going on?" I asked as Jane opened the plastic box with the chicken soup, I brought her.

"Since I was 14," she said.

I was speechless, and my leg hurt. I have been sitting in a chair far too long. I got up and moved my foot around, "I guess I just can't understand why. You are such a calculated person, so intelligent and reasonable. How can you hurt yourself this way?" I sighed. "While you were resting, I read some articles on the web, and I understand it's complicated, but Jesus, Jane. You were able to find a way to dramatically improve one of the most common processes in the unit in your first few months here, how have you not found a solution for this yet?"

"I wasn't trying," she said, her eyes fixed on me.

"What about someone else?" I asked, "Your brother? teachers? friends?" I knew her parents were not a part of her life.

"I've never told anyone," she admitted. "It's so difficult to explain. Cutting, it's a way to feel better. It helps me deal with life. It's been with me for so long. I mean, I have tried to stop, I have, many times, but there's always a voice within me, that says, why? Why should you let this go? It doesn't harm anyone."

"It harms you, Jane!" I said harshly, "How can I keep you in the unit now?"

Her mouth opened slightly, then she grew silent.

"I understand." She said, "Do what you have to do."

The next day, December 16th around noon, I knocked on her door.

"Thank you for yesterday," she said as she let me in.

I nodded. "You're feeling better?" I asked.

"Much better," she replied, smiling. "I'm sorry for troubling you, Office Shein, I really am. You have more important things to deal with."

This is important, I wanted to tell her, as important as can be, but I was silent, my mind racing.

"I brought you some more soup," I said, handing her another plastic box.

"Thanks."

“I better go,” I said, “group meeting starts in 30 minutes.”

I sat in my car, in the parking lot beneath her apartment. My leg was bothering me again. I picked up my phone and searched for Jane's name in my contacts.

Hi Jane, I wrote,

Wanted to let you know I walk daily from 21:00-22:00. Walking is part of my formula. Join me?

Nick