

The crowd gathering behind me was filling with shock and disgust, but all I could think was what a miracle it was that it took this long for a man to wind up dead. Well, more of a kid to be honest. An Olympic track runner, some Ethiopian named Dawit Tulu. Barely 18, but now he'll have to settle for racing his own chalk outline. Couldn't have the goddamn common courtesy to keep a bullet out of his brain for 18 days until this disaster is over. My name is Micki by the way, Micki Klausner, but there'll be enough time for introductions later. What's important is that I needed to get to the bottom of this, and I figured I only had about 3 or 4 minutes of peace left.

You see, I was making the rounds over at the Olympic Park, 3 hours of traipsing along in circles around this megaplex until my legs started feeling like slats of splintery wood. And "mega" is no understatement, mind you. Thirty-five buildings as new and pristine as the architect's model, now draped in the flags and banners of the delegations inhabiting them, spread over more than 800,000 square meters of pompous self-importance. It was during one of my breaks, which I'll admit had grown both in frequency and length as the day and the sweltering sun had dragged on, that the woman burst out of the third-floor balcony of the building closest to me and let out a blood-curdling scream in a language I was thankful I didn't understand. It looked like this break was getting cut short.

A dozen strides later and I realized the scream was an understatement. The smell hit me first, like rotten eggs and moldy garlic. I recognized it immediately. I spotted the woman from the balcony. "Where?" I asked, in English. She pointed towards a door marked 304. She started rambling, but what about I couldn't tell you - I had what I needed. The door and doorframe showed no sign of forced entry. I pushed on the door, slowly at first and then flung the rest once the far corner was secure. The body laid sprawled on its stomach, and the pool of brownish blood surrounding it wasn't even half the amount found in the room. Trophies laid scattered on the floor, parts shimmering and parts stained, a crumpled-up duffle bag lying in one corner, shredded almost completely to pieces, the mirror smeared red with dragged hand prints.

First things first. I took out my camera and started going to town. This wasn't my first rodeo and I usually enjoyed taking my sweet, sweet time. The body wasn't going anywhere, you know? But this time was different. This time, any wasted minute is another minute closer to the impending shitstorm. The bed, the duffle bag, the trophies, all were soon safe and sound on my hard drive, all that was left was the body. I didn't have any gloves, so my sleeves had to make due as I flipped it over. More than a dozen stab wounds were scattered all over the torso, arms and hands. Signs of a struggle, a particularly unsuccessful one. Except for a few shallow abrasions on his left cheek, his face was smooth and content, with a bluish tinge.

At this point I remembered to call my partner, Marwan.

"Officer Issa?" I said into the device. "This is your partner"

"I know who this is, Klausner, what is it?"

"I have a body here at the Olympic Village, building 24. An athlete, Ethiopian. Multiple stab wounds, seems to have been a struggle. Get over here as soon as you can."

“A body? What are you talking about? What have you gotten yourself into? Klausner... are you there?”

Unfortunately, the conversation was at an end. My 4 minutes were over. Four men now stood at the entrance to the apartment. One of them I recognized. Guy Levi, an old associate from back in my Shin Bet days, surveyed the room. I couldn't tell what surprised him more, the dead body or my presence. My eye caught his, but one of his lackeys wouldn't let the moment linger, hollering, “What the hell are you doing here Swede?!”

You see. Now it's time for a little confession. I ain't really a special agent. Well, not anymore, that is.

In my prime I'd have beaten off contenders to my pedestal with a broomstick. A nice gold pedestal with the words “best agent in Israel or Palestine” engraved in bold, though many would have added quotation marks. Some called me hard-boiled and foolhardy, others a crazy son of a bitch. I had faced down extremists and psychopaths, been shot, beaten, frozen, burned and drowned. I'd pursued fleeing suspects under gunfire down dark alleyways with nary a second thought. Height, crowds, snakes, confined spaces, open spaces, dogs trained to hate the smell of a Jew, I shrugged them all off or at least functioned in spite of them. My ma used to say that I dressed up as a cop one Purim when I was ten and never took off the costume, not really, anyway.

Sure, I'm a guy who knows how to take his pleasures. All those assignments don't go away on their own after all. One hungover morning too many was curtains for me, 20 years of service down the drain. But then the Olympics came along, and I was handed my second chance, sort of. Aside from the standard security operation, which is supposedly larger than the last two games combined, the International Olympic Committee commissioned one more task force – The Coexistence Guard. A hundred schlemiels, half Israeli and half Palestinian, mostly students desperate for a summer job, paired up and masqueraded as the games' symbol of peace and harmony. In-the-flesh proof to the world that Jews and Arabs can stand the presence of one another for 15 minutes without throwing rocks or slinging bullets at each other, and if the Olympic Committee get to add a few more billions to their coffers and the local politicians get their tacky photo ops with a bunch of sweat drenched ambassadors along the way, all the better.

The Guard has another name around these parts - The Swedish Guard. Locals who claim no strong-armed peace deal or dressed up puppets forced to hold hands can cool over thousands of years of bad blood, often say “This is the Middle East, this ain't Sweden. Peace just isn't in the DNA here”. That would make us Swedes, unnatural here, thrust upon them by the Olympics, or the UN or whatever international cabal they've decided is responsible for their misery today.

Why would I join up with them? What can I say, I missed the fieldwork, and a beat's a beat.

“Hey there fellas, nice of you to show up,” elegantly dodging the whole Swede taunt. “Could you give me a second? I'm in the middle of a private conversation here”.

The goon didn't seem pleased, yet was given no chance to escalate as Guy gestured towards the body, ordering a sweep of the room. One of his men was sent outside to mark the crime scene and keep out any curious bystanders. Then Guy turned to me, “Nice threads Mick.”

Yeah, the uniform might just have been the worst part of the job. First thing that catches your eye is the vest. White, with a set of golden olive branches emblazoned on either side of the lapel. The pants are a creamy white with golden linings leading down to a pair of white boots. Not very practical for the patrols in the sand and dust, but you got to keep 'em shiny every damn day. On our heads, shiny yellow berets. They chose yellow as the prime color, since it's the only color in the Olympic rings not represented in either the Israeli or Palestinian flags. All that yellow didn't really help with the whole "Swedish Guard" jape, had people claiming some golden-haired Svens or Bjorns belonged in that outfit, and far away from here. All that was missing was an oversized novelty sword with a shiny pommel to impress the kiddies. I took to wearing my brown trench coat around it when my attempts to suppress the sheer embarrassment of this charade of a parade failed. What respect I had left as one of the older guards means administration usually turned a blind eye to my disregard. Not that I paid close attention to the reprimands that did occasionally come way, anyway.

"What happened here?" Guy continued.

"Looks like this one ain't gonna be competing," I said. "And it wasn't a clean job either, this one is as sloppy as they come. As far as I can tell, nothing of value was stolen, and no sign of any of his teamma..."

"And what exactly were *you* doing here, Micki?"

"Well, I was patrolling the area when I heard the ruckus, came as fast as I could."

"Classic crime of passion." Said one the goons to the other.

"But you know you're not supposed to go looking for real trouble, you know you're just a Swede."

"Am I supposed to just turn around and buy a falafel?"

"You're supposed to call the real cops, you're not even armed!"

"You know I've been hit with more bullets than your green boys ever shot. I'm just doing my duty."

"Your duty now is to dress up in your shiny little uniform and parade around with your little terrorist friend."

That was it for me. I took a swing at him. It's at these moments when I lose my temper that I forget how lanky and unsuitable I am for fights up close. I missed. Then the pain started. He landed a lucky punch, and then another, and then three fortunate kicks, followed by a coincidental knee to the head. Guy's a pretty burly one, so when he decides to go all in on you, you can expect to get your clock cleaned. He didn't go all in, but I didn't ask for his pity. It's ok, you can't win them all, though I seem to be winning less and less of them as the years go by.

By the end of it I was left lying on the floor. Guy extended his hand, which I slapped away, though as I struggled to get to my feet I was embarrassed to find I may have needed it.

“Only you can upstage a murder scene, Klausner.” Guy sneered. “Go on, get out of here, leave this to the professionals.”

“That’s what I was trying to do.” I said. Out loud. In my head...

I could have taken it further, but I had no interest in beating up his fist anymore with my face. Besides, I had everything I needed from the scene, and the window for catching whoever did this while he was still nearby was closing rapidly. Any guy with two grains of sense in his head would have quit at this point, but as my ex-wife once told me, I’m “like an empty engine running on an endless supply of fumes”.

While I was waiting for Issa to show up, I returned to the lady who quite blaringly spread the news about the homicide. Through broken English, I learned she was the cleaning lady, caught by surprise on her normal routine. She didn’t seem the killing type, nor did I have the authority to do anything about it if I thought otherwise. I started knocking on doors. Most of the occupants were out. Some were training, some haven’t moved in yet, their events taking place in the latter half of the games. Those who weren’t absent in body were at least absent in mind, displaying the obliviousness and ignorance of youth that I’ve rapidly become more and more aware of over the past couple decades.

Issa finally showed up, out of breath, though the rare times when his breaths were steady seemed to be more noteworthy. A compactly built man in his late 30’s, he sported short cut grizzled hair and an equally short cut grizzled mustache. He is everything I can’t be, with a wife who loves and cherishes him, and four adoring children. He’s reliable and straightforward, but not in the way that makes people wanna punch him.

“What happened to your face?”

I hadn’t even realized I was bleeding from my nose.

“Altitude sickness, I’d wager.” The black eye I later realized I was wearing proved this wasn’t my best lie. “Look, I’m sorry to disturb you, but there’s been a homicide and...”

“And what do we have to do with it?” Issa demanded.

Marwan believed in the guard, but more as the symbol it was supposed to be rather than an actual security force. He was more than content to wave the peace flag around, pick up his paycheck and feed his family. Unlike me, Issa also had a second job, moonlighting as actual security at the mall over in Sheikh Jarrah. One time he forgot to switch uniforms between shifts, then had to get a new one from all the rotten fruits and vegetables he was pelted with. That one came right out of his paycheck.

“Look, I didn’t want to get you involved, but this one is a doozy. The scene is still fresh, and... and I can’t do this alone.”

“What about the real cops?”

"We *are* the real cops! What you think they'd take just any hobo off the street for this job? Listen, if we're the ones to get to the bottom of this, you'll be made. This is your shot Marwan."

If only my motives were as pure.

He was still hesitant, but soon caved. I felt a little sorry putting so much pressure on the poor guy, but Marwan Issa *was* the caving type. I quickly filled him in on what happened. The name Dawit Tulu didn't seem to ring a bell. "I'm going to check out the roof," I told Issa. "See if I can't ascertain an escape route from the building. Keep an eye out over here, and if anyone comes out of room 304, call me. "

I rode the elevator up to the 16th floor and then made my way up a flight of steel edged concrete stairs up to the roof. Up here the heat was broken by an unruly breeze. I struck up a cigarette, though it took me four or five tries to light it. I walked the perimeter of the building, peering off the edges of the west, north and south sides of the building, the view fragmented by the rest of the village buildings, the administration office, and training facilities. Off to the east, the stadium. A behemoth of metal and glass rising out of a foundation of giant Jerusalem stones, the five Olympic rings hoisted on top. The stone base had to be washed thoroughly every few days, as new graffiti popped up regularly, claiming "Zionists out of Palestine" or "No Medals for Terror". At least the vandals made sure the thing was always in pristine condition. The stadium was built right on the border between Israel and Palestine, making it the only stadium in the world where you can walk in from country, and walk out in another, at least for the duration of the games, when the city stays open and people can move around freely. Once the torch gets extinguished it's back to the fences and sentries. The large square surrounding the stadium was outlined by a flea market set up to trick incoming tourists into haggling down ludicrously high prices to ridiculously high prices for cheap souvenirs. I could smell the faint aroma of grease from the falafel pits all the way to the roof, as dinner time was fast approaching and some of the vendors began to close up shop.

"You know, it's quite nice up there." I said when I came back down.

"Any leads?" Issa asked.

"Not that I can see, and it looks like we're running out of daylight. We might have to regroup on this one."

Issa seemed displeased. I assume he had hoped I would come to my senses up on the rooftop.

"Let's head over to The Mikveh. I took some pictures of the scene, I think we can hash it out."

"I can't tonight Mick, Amani has her night shift and I need to put the little one to bed. Besides, you know that place gives me the creeps."

"It's the only place I can think straight."

"Well, I would hate to get in the way of your thought process. Listen, we can talk about this more tomorrow."

I admit, I was a little peeved that Issa wouldn't indulge me on this. You'd think he'd owe me at least that considering our history. You see, my and Issa's families go back a little farther than just this recent stunt. His older brother Walid used to chauffeur my old man right after the peace deal was hashed out. My dad made his name as a surgical oncologist, and a great one at that. In 2039 he was chosen to participate in one of the peace and collaboration programs - going over into Palestinian hospitals and teaching them state-of-the-art tricks of the trade. You can't hate the guy who saved your mom or your brother's life, right? Well, sort of. Some still opposed the idea. So, Walid, a nurse at the time, offered to give my dad a ride from the border, to save some eyebrow muscles a stretch at the sight of an Israeli car.

2039. A lot had happened that year. The world was shocked in October of 2039 – when the curtains were swiftly and abruptly drawn on more than 100 years of conflict in less than two weeks of negotiations. The long-awaited Camp David handshake even happened to coincide with the autumn day that my then-wife found herself to be pregnant with what was supposed to be my first-born son. Everything was about to change, but nothing really did.

The accords could probably be traced back to Janet Brooker, a White House communications staffer. Her affair with President Jacobs stubbornly clung to the headlines for months like she clung to his, well... you get the picture. Add to that a collapsing stock market and a few ill-advised foreign interventions in North Africa and you got yourself what the journos liked to call a "Presidential Trifecta".

Twenty five percent. Just one out of four. That's how many people approved of Jacobs at his lowest point. That's just one point shy of Nixon at his worst. Now, no one wants to be thrown in the trash bin of history of course, and Jacobs knew it would take a miracle to keep him and his increasingly short-lived legacy from being forcefully slam dunked in there. He used what little political capital he had left from his time as Secretary of State to call in some favors from Israeli Prime Minister Eitan and Palestinian Authority President Zaid.

Peace was struck not under a veil of friendship and goodwill, but under the foreboding shroud of sanction and decay. Negotiations were shielded away from the public eye, but insider leaks and the rare staffer interview over the years have painted a picture of what had happened there. It's no modern art masterpiece. You see, this deal wasn't born out of any real desire to see a fair and just end to the conflict, but from Jacobs' forthright contention that failure would result in the immediate withdrawal of financial aid to both governments, and the retrieval of the American ambassador in Tel Aviv back to Washington for further deliberations about the future of the relationship. For a President with no prospects of re-election and nothing to lose, this was the last straw he could grasp at. To everyone's surprise, the straw held.

Of course, peace was just the beginning of this story. Once the papers were all signed and the photo ops were over, all we were left with were two sides, still just as pissed, now sitting on either side of a hastily drawn border that looks like the heartbeat monitor of a patient having a panic attack, quite fittingly I would add. Collaborative programs were immediately drawn up to try to unite the fractured Israelis and Palestinians. Student exchanges, security training, mixed social worker schools were established all in a bid to build the peace from the ground up. Slowly but surely, but slowly. And to

top it all off were the games. The 2048 Jerusalem Olympics. Just as South Africa had hosted the Rugby World Cup four years after the fall of Apartheid, to showcase its new-found civility to the world, so too would Jerusalem, the newly divided capital of Israel and Palestine, try to keep the flimsy duct tape holding it all together intact while the rest of the world runs and jumps and swims for their metal circles. Nothing like a hotbed of patriotic fervor to really keep the waters calm, right? Just ask poor old Dawit.

Evening was drawing near and I checked into The Mikveh. The place used to be an actual mikveh in one of the east side neighborhoods that was handed over to the Arabs. Story goes that the couple who ran it cursed the place before they were forced to leave. Looks like the curse worked. Now it's an underground dive bar frequented by criminals. In fact, it's run by criminals, or former criminals at least. Three rainbow colored faux crystal chandeliers barely gave the room any light, which is a blessing considering the state of the cracked concrete floor. It isn't the most pleasant place to spend an evening, and most cons haven't really perfected their martini mixing, but for some reason it feels like home to me now. The owner doesn't care which side of the city you're from, cash is the only religion here, and that's good enough for me. It was also a great place for an investigator to pick up leads. The Mikveh was usually quiet, a good place to hold a conversation or light up or just sulk over your drink in peace. Except for tonight that is. It seemed a few drunk Olympians managed to meander in, and now instead of the usual 5 patrons, the room seemed to pack at least four times as many.

I took a seat at the bar which was always awkwardly high compared to the short bar stools, but that suited me just fine. I've always been a tall Jew, and lanky. My head tends to lurch forward from the rest of my body like a parrot's beak. When I walk through the aisles at the grocery store it seems as if I'm looking down upon the vegetables with condescension. In fact, I've always slouched just so I don't stand out, don't need all that extra attention, and my back is starting to pay the bill on that one. To my right, a young man was examining the menu closely and carefully as if the final exam in overpriced booze was tomorrow.

The barkeep came up to me, and wiped off my section of the bar with a rag that seemed to leave the spot dirtier than before.

"What'll you have, Mick?"

He knew my name, I didn't know his, but I've dealt with this guy too many times before to ask now.

"Pour me a Freud, would ya." The barkeep turned around and reached up for a bottle of the single malt. You see, the ol' ex-wife loved to nag about getting my head shrunk. I would hear nothing of it. If there's one thing I hate more than wasting one person's time, it's wasting two's. Now, I've managed to honor her wish and taken up her advice, in a way. Around these parts, barkeeps know what to pour when I ask for a Freud or a Jung, a Klein or a Skinner. Though I try to save the latter for special occasions.

The crowd was turning rambunctious. I looked behind me. A group of American and British athletes were starting to yell at each other, basically comparing which country has a bigger dick. I would have guessed Florida would be a dead giveaway. Still, it was refreshing to see an international conflict being reduced to the level of a bar fight, with no real consequences. Before long they were imitating

each other's accents. The American shouted "Speak Ameriglish!". His drink was promptly taken away from him.

I was on my third Freud session and fifth cigarette, and had gotten no smarter by looking at the photos on my phone. I stared into that screen, zooming in and out, for the better part of two hours, it had been a while since I had refreshed my drink. The barkeep wasn't used to such long dry spells.

"Yo Mick, you been hugging that glass for a while. You wanna buy your drink a drink?"

That didn't faze me, by now all I could focus on was every last minute detail inside room 304. The mirror, the coffee table, the angle in which the body was spread out, the duffle bag... The duffle bag. My body tensed, and for a long moment I couldn't move.

I went back and took another look at one of the photos, and stared at it for what must have been at least five minutes. By now the barkeep's interest was piqued as well.

"You find anything interesting?"

I finally broke off from the picture.

"This was no crime of passion. This is a professional hit. Planned down to the inch."