

POLITICS IN BED

By David Zellnik

America, tonight. A couple in a bed. He's reading his phone. She's reading a book. Or she's playing with his hair. Whatever she's doing, he is reading his phone, distracted.

JESS

Hey can I ask you something?

TOM

(Not looking up) Sure.

JESS

If you murdered someone and were on death row, what would your last meal be?

TOM

(Beat. Still reading) Not sure.

JESS

Mine would be chicken pad thai I think.

Beat.

I mean, they have like a million calories and it would be so great to eat it with like, a clear conscience. What about you?

Beat.

Whatcha reading?

TOM

Depressing article.

JESS

About?

TOM

Nothing. A girl in prison.

He puts phone down.

Cashews. Mine would be cashews. My last meal.

JESS

Cashews?

TOM

Yeah, I fucking love 'em.

JESS

But: just cashews?

TOM

Honey roasted maybe, but yeah. I'd eat like a million till I felt sick and then I'd be like, "*Uggghhh I feel gross kill me I'm stuffed.*"
So what did you do? To get on death row.

JESS

Oh. I killed Henry Kissinger. I call it my "Killing Henry Kissinger fantasy."

TOM

(Dry, not too aggressive) And yet you were super pro Obama.

JESS

Ok...?

TOM

Just saying. I mean, Obama gave him a "Distinguished Public Servant" award. And Hillary said-

JESS

(Overlap) Too soon.

TOM

-said she "sought Kissinger's advice on several occasions"—

JESS

Too soon. Besides, you know the rule: no politics in bed.

TOM

Of course.

JESS

And Hillary was – *is* – progressive on women. And kids.

TOM

Totally.
Except you know, 12-year-old Palestinian girls.

JESS

Excuse me?

TOM

Nothing.

Silence.

JESS

You are not allowed to talk politics in bed and especially not Israel. We agreed during the Second Intifada!

TOM

Good thing too: you and I had a *really tough time* making it through that Intifada.

JESS

Omigod!

You're really going there!

TOM

Here, let me read you something?

JESS

(Overlapping) No no no-

TOM

(Read his phone) "A young black girl was released today from prison today"

JESS

(Sudden shift) Oh. In America?

TOM

In America. Harlem.

JESS

(Overlapping) America? *That's* a relief.

I mean: go on.

TOM

"The girl has nine siblings, and the family lives in poverty. She had um, *(quick transposition)* seen a cop killing another kid, another black kid, unarmed, several weeks before."

JESS

Awful.

TOM

So then: a month later she took this knife from her kitchen without telling anyone. She hid it under her blouse. And she approached this *cop*. He thought she looked suspicious, the way she was walking, so he told her to lie down. They arrested her when they found the knife.

JESS

Jesus.

Wait, she was arrested for *intent*? And she's a minor? That makes no sense. Is the ACLU on this?

Tom shrugs.

Has anyone said anything?

TOM

It was illegal by international law to lock her up. But she served 2 and ½ months for it. She was only 12.

Silence. The age is the tip off.

JESS

Wait. Wait a second. *(Putting it together)* 12-year-old Palestinian girls...

She grabs his phone. Reads.

Jesus, you promised! *Al Jazeera!*

TOM

What, it's a news site!

JESS

She was Palestinian! You said she was black!

TOM

Made you empathize, though, for like a second.

JESS

Whoa! You're really doing this.

You're really doing this.

TOM

How does it hurt you to hear what is happening?

JESS

We made a deal!

She gets up. Maybe takes sheet with her.

I can't sleep here!

TOM

Great! No politics *in bed* so we won't stay in bed!

He gets up.

JESS
Fine.

TOM
Fine!

JESS
Here we were having a nice conversation about death-row meals and now it's this!

TOM
You asked what I was reading!

JESS
You said the victim was black!

TOM
Do you hear yourself?

JESS
You realize 30 Israelis died in stabbings! These aren't stones being thrown all symbolically, these are *knives*.

TOM
The Israelis have guns.

JESS
And when black kids across America stab 30 people out of nowhere, then we can talk!

TOM
Out of *nowhere*?

JESS
And we don't even know what actually happened!

Silence. New tack:

TOM
Look at her. She's beautiful. Look at the picture. She's 12. Megan's age.

JESS
Leave Megan out of this!

TOM
Look.

She looks at phone.

TOM

There's a settlement next to her village. Maybe it's as simple as a bored guard sees her every day walking by. Maybe he likes her. Maybe he taunts her. Maybe he wants her alone...

JESS

That's a lot of assumptions. She had a knife.

TOM

They *say* she had a knife.

JESS

What, they arrest her just cause they're *mean*. Cause they're sex perverts!

TOM

Ok, picture this. What we actually know.

There's a settlement of Jews next to a village, a Jews-only town. You're a 12-year-old girl. There's a wall around your village to protect the settlers, to protect them from *you*, from having to see you. You have 9 siblings. You are poor. And the settlement next to you, they have lawns while you ration water. And guarding that settlement is a guard.

In a special, we see the guard, Ismail. Tom might physically act out what is going on, trying to figure it out.

Picture him. Stone faced. Every day you walk by. And one day, you walk closer. Who are these aliens on the land, building walls, walling you in? You move close. He shouts!

TOM + ISMAIL

(Facing forward. Inside a scene.) Get down. Get down!

TOM

She gets down. She's handcuffed. Did she have a knife? Who knows?

JESS

She confessed she had a knife!

TOM

They plant knives on people!

JESS

She confessed!

TOM

She was tortured!

JESS

Why would they torture her? She has no secrets! She's not some ticking time bomb!

TOM

You think life is an episode of 24! Torture is its own message! It says: even your children will not be safe. Your beautiful daughters, we can take them at our will! Leave! Before we take them all!

JESS

That is just *your* weird *anti-Semitic* fantasy about Jewish monsters! You think they twirl their mustaches plotting ways to kill Arabs! They *don't wanna get stabbed!* They don't wanna get *blown up in a bus!* That's reasons they are security conscious! Ok picture this:

Perhaps she acts it out.

You're 12 years old. Your family is poor cause, I dunno, there's lots of poverty in the Middle East. And yes, you live next to rich Jews. So they earn money, they're rich. That's not their fault.

TOM

The Jews there are in an illegal settlement. They're on stolen land.

JESS

(*Ignoring*) And you're a kid, told by everyone there is glory, glory in killing the infidel! And you take a knife, you want to be a hero. You take a knife and you run towards a guard, he begs you:

JESS + ISMAIL

Stop!

JESS

But you run towards him, and instead of shooting her, like you know, American cops shot Tamir Rice, who was just *playing*, they ask her to lie down. That's all. So you lay down!

TOM

They arrested her! Interrogated her without a lawyer!

JESS

They released her!

TOM
After 2 and ½ months!

JESS
She attempted terrorism!

TOM
Attacking a soldier in uniform on occupied land is not terrorism! That's fair game.

JESS
Jews are fair game?

TOM
How are you hearing that??!

New idea. She boxes around him, like a fighter.

JESS
Fine! Take it out on me! Take all your rage at Israel out on me, the Jewish wife!

TOM
Quit it.

JESS
I'm strong. Come on. Hit me.

TOM
What?

JESS
You have some issues you wanna work out!

TOM
Ok, so now cause I'm Irish-American, if I have an opinion about Israel, I'm anti-Semitic!

JESS
I have family in Israel!

TOM
I have family in Texas, doesn't mean you can't hate Ted Cruz.

JESS
You see: you hate Israel!

TOM

Uh, right now the feeling's not really too positive.
You know what? You were right. *Politics in bed*. I'm sleeping on the couch!

He goes to leave she stops him.

JESS

You are not you are staying and we are hashing this out!

They wrestle as he tries to leave.

Israelis have to protect themselves! Admit it!

TOM

She was framed!

JESS

She was guilty!

They are still wrestling/fighting.

ISMAIL

Excuse me. Excuse me.

They stop fighting.

Excuse me.

If lights haven't shifted already, they do now and Ismail is no longer in a special; he is in the same light as Jess and Tom.

JESS

Oh, hi.

TOM

You talk. You can talk to us.

ISMAIL

Sorry, to interrupt.

JESS

No no, that's ok.

ISMAIL

I'm sorry to enter a marital fight. My name is Ismail.

JESS
I'm Jess, *Jessica*.

TOM
Tom.

Maybe they shake hands.

ISMAIL
I just wanted to say: Whether Dima did or didn't do it...whether she meant to stab him or not...does it matter?

Beat.

TOM
You seem... like a nice guy.

ISMAIL
Thank you.

TOM
Why on Earth did you become an Israeli soldier?

JESS
That's *rude*.

TOM
What?
(*To Ismail*) Was that rude?

JESS
There's a draft you know.

TOM
He could conscientiously object.

JESS
If he's *Ashkenazi*. The Sephardic Jews in Israel, they don't always have the privilege to choose to resist. I mean they *can*, but their careers are ruined-

ISMAIL
I didn't choose to be a soldier

JESS
See, they get drafted. They are pawns in a system. They are good people who are trapped. Right?

TOM

He made a choice. You make choices.

ISMAIL

I'm not the one who arrested her. I'm not a soldier. I am not Israeli. I am Dima's father, Ismail. The girl arrested is my daughter.

Beat.

TOM

Oh.

JESS

Oh. This is um...awkward.

TOM

We... didn't um...
We wanted the guard.

ISMAIL

I am sorry.

TOM

I mean, the guard would help us maybe clear things up. The article is a little vague on the details leading up to the arrest.

ISMAIL

I understand. I do not know what happened: my daughter doesn't speak to me now. She is so upset. They fined me 2000 dollars for what happened. They took away my ability to work and they fined me. They treat her as a hero on the street but we have no money.

JESS

But: did she do it?

TOM

Jess.

JESS

Did she?

Beat.

ISMAIL

Everyone assumes they know what happened based on scraps of news. I make assumptions too, based on news.

ISMAIL (*cont*)

She says she did not. But perhaps she did.

But I think: this is the argument the Israelis want us to have. *Her* motives, *her* crime. She is a 12-year old in the middle of an occupation. It doesn't matter what she did. She is 12. The crime cannot be hers. The crime must be the soldier there to begin with.

JESS

But would she have stabbed him?

ISMAIL

She was 12.

(*He sighs, sad*)

I don't know.

She is sometimes a stranger to me. Before, I would see her only late at night, after work. I would come home and she would be sleeping and I would say *habibti*, *habibti*, and I would sing her a lullaby.

I do not know if she did it. But *if* she did it I think I know why.

When I was 12, her age, I was told I had cancer. For two months – until they realized they were wrong. For two months, I thought I would die. And for those two months, everything in the world, everything... *shined*. The sky so blue and my friends' faces so precious. And leaves! Trees! Houses! And if my Dima did this: she must have assumed she'd die, that she'd be killed in the act. And I imagine, our refugee camp, where there's little running water and sewage overflows, suddenly everything must have become, for a moment: beautiful.

(*Silence. New thought.*)

It's nice here, your home.

JESS

Thank you.

ISMAIL

I like this carpet.

TOM

We got it on our honeymoon in Turkey.

ISMAIL

It's nice.

Beat.

TOM

Ok...so, we should probably go to bed.

ISMAIL

Ahh.

TOM

It's just – I think we're supposed to talk about stuff like this and then go to sleep.

JESS

I have work tomorrow early.

ISMAIL

No no, I understand.

TOM

And I have a meeting.

ISMAIL

I understand. I will leave.

*He tries to disappear. He tries harder.
He gestures: I'm trying!*

TOM

Um, this is...

JESS

-A little weird?

ISMAIL

You summoned me.

TOM

Did we?

ISMAIL

(He shrugs) I am still here.

*Beat. They try and make him disappear
through wishing it deeply. Or snapping. But
he remains.*

JESS

Well... we're gonna get in bed.

ISMAIL

I will sit here. Maybe by tomorrow I'll be gone.

They get into bed. He sits by them. Tom hands the phone he was reading the article on. Ismail helpfully plugs it in for the night.

JESS
God I still feel so tense.

TOM
No more politics in bed.

JESS
I need to relax.

TOM
Oh, maybe you could sing us a lullaby?

JESS
That's rude, he's not here for us.

TOM
He says he likes to sing lullabies

JESS
He said he sang them for his *kid*. Give the man some peace.

But Ismail is game. He starts to sing, a few lines of song. Soft. Unobtrusive. But sweet.

They listen. Jess closes her eyes. Then opens them.

JESS
I think if I knew I was going to die...my last meal would be water, clear cold water.
And I would think on the faces I love. And the water would taste sweet.

Ismail is still singing softly, facing forward.

Lights fade.

End of play.