

**THEN
AND NOW**
Kinneret maintained
a positive attitude
all the time she was
in hospital, and
refuses to dwell on
her life – and looks
– before the blast

I USED TO BE THE GIRL EVERYONE STARED AT FOR BEING PRETTY...

Five years ago, Kinneret Chaya Boosany was a popular party girl enjoying life in Tel Aviv. Then, a suicide bomber blew her world apart. Barely surviving the blast, she tells Joanna Chen how friends and family helped her on the long road to recovery. Photographs by Shirley Barenholz

THE SUICIDE BOMBER CAME UP TO THE BAR WHERE I WAS STANDING AND ORDERED A COFFEE. I TURNED AWAY TO MAKE IT FOR HIM AND HE BLEW HIMSELF UP. I flew backwards in the blast and everything, myself included, went up in flames. A fire was raging behind the bar and someone yelled out, “There’s a girl back there,” but the fire brigade wouldn’t let anyone in because they were afraid another bomb would go off. I used to wonder, if they’d taken me out even 30 seconds before they did, would I have been less burned?

‘I was wearing a nylon shirt and stretchy jeans, highly inflammable materials that didn’t give me a chance. The paramedic who treated me as I was rushed to hospital said my clothes were welded to my skin. He held my left hand all the way to the hospital because it had been almost completely ripped off. My right eye was hanging out of its socket.

‘Before the bomb back in 2002, I was a party girl; I was 23 and beautiful, with tattoos on my back and a piercing in my belly button. I’d studied ballet and occasionally worked as a dancer. I’d just finished a year of studies in reflexology and had been working in a café called My Coffee Shop since the summer, mostly bartending. I was doing at least five shifts a week, ►



REBUILDING

Left: Kinneret's mother has been a constant source of support. Above: smiling through the pain. Below: a care worker helps adjust her bandaging

◀ and living with my boyfriend, Tal, with two dogs and a lot of love. I was a creature of the night, sleeping the day away and partying into the small hours.

'I grew up in the suburbs of Tel Aviv and I often skipped school and just hung out on the beach all day, lapping up the sun with friends. I met Tal when I was 21 and it was love at first sight.

'Life was great for me personally, but 2002 was a hard year in Israel, with a lot of suicide bombings. Rather than succumb to our fear, we'd joke that the next bomb would be at My Coffee Shop, and we all agreed that the person behind the bar would be out of the firing line. A few weeks before the bombing, I read a newspaper article about a girl who'd been injured in a similar attack a few years earlier. I remember thinking, "Oh my God, that was so long ago. How come she's still in hospital?" Today I understand that rehabilitation is a lifelong process. There are no short cuts.

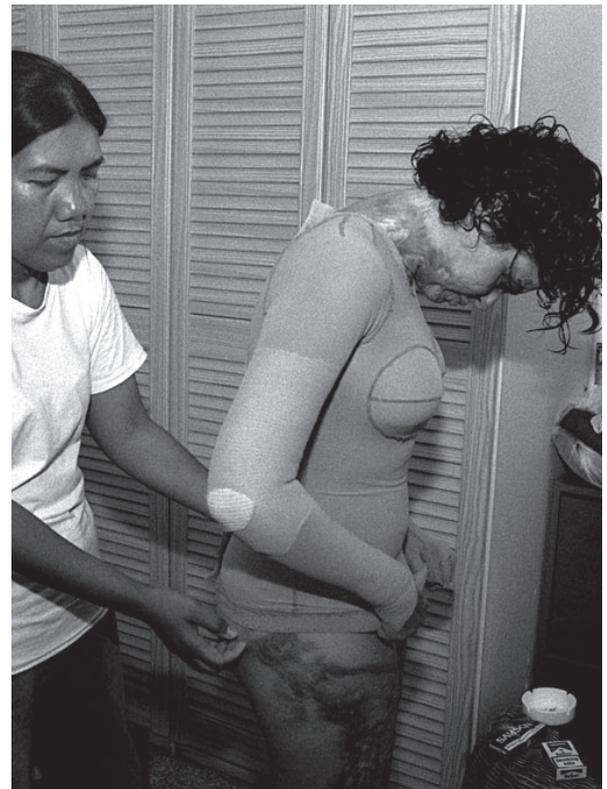
'I don't remember the day of the bomb at all; it's one big blank. It was a Saturday evening and my last memory is of the night before.

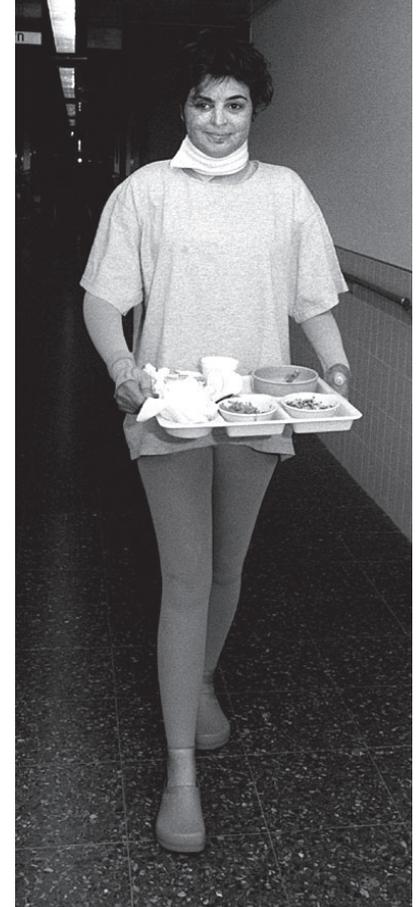
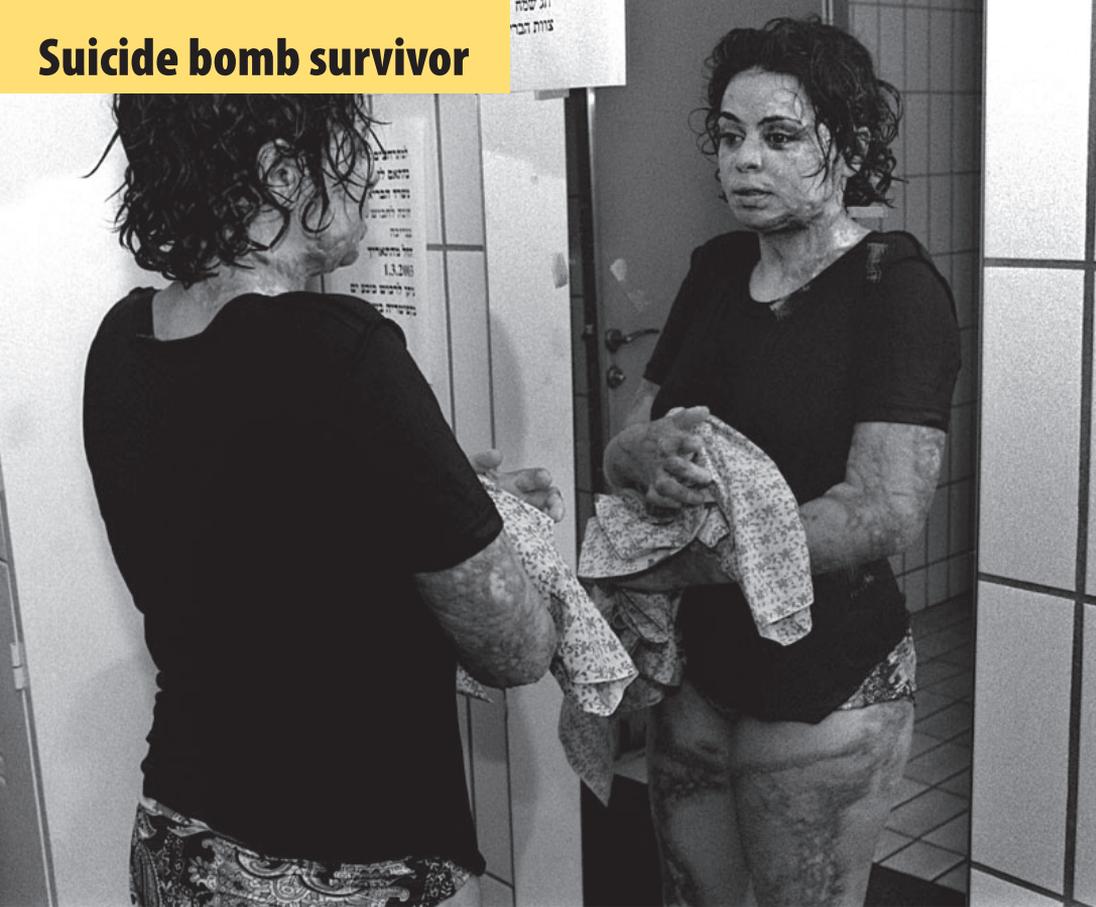
On Friday, the Israeli Army had begun Operation Defensive Shield, a campaign to stamp out the spate of suicide bombings that had plagued Israel for the previous six months. There were bad vibes all over; you could sense on the street that something was going to happen.

'I did the early shift that Friday and people were getting calls telling them they'd been called up for army duty while they were drinking their morning coffee. The Saturday night bartender got called up, too, and on Friday I was asked to take his shift behind the bar. Tal told me that just before the bomb, he drove by with a friend, and I popped outside to say hello, agreeing to meet them at the end of my shift. Half an hour later, that part of my life was over.

'I was rushed to the trauma unit of the Sourasky Medical Center in Tel Aviv. One of my lungs was crushed, my left arm was shattered, I lost one eye and half a finger. In an emergency operation, they sliced open my stomach. They had to cut my skin so that all the accumulated liquid could pour out of my frazzled body, like a hotdog on the grill about to burst. My ▶

'ONE OF MY LUNGS WAS CRUSHED, MY LEFT ARM WAS SHATTERED, I LOST AN EYE AND A FINGER'





A NEW ME
Above: Kinneret in the rehabilitation unit, where she now helps other burns victims to recover. Above right: Kinneret's friends called her Robocop Woman when she first learned to walk in her pressure suit. Below: showing ex-boyfriend Tal the video art she's been working on



◀ mother said the first time she came to my bed there wasn't a person there, just a maze of tubes and machines and beeps and infusions. There was no Kinneret.

'During those first critical days, my parents gave me a middle name – Chaya, which means "alive", while the initials "K" and "C" mean 'strength' in Hebrew. My mum and dad lived in the hospital for eight months, watching me begin my life all over again.

'With third-degree burns over 70 per cent of my body, I was given a 16 per cent chance of survival for the first four months, during which time I was in a coma.

'The first time I woke up, I felt very hot, and I didn't understand what was going on. I opened my eyes and saw my mum wearing a mask and a hospital robe. She said, "Kinneret, everyone is so happy that you're here." I was heavily medicated at the time and I thought, "Oh my God, I'm the centre of attention. What fun!"

'Once out of the coma, I had to be weaned off all the drugs I'd been given. My body shook and I threw up continuously. During

'WHEN I WAS GIVEN A MIRROR TO LOOK AT MYSELF, I WASN'T TOO SHOCKED. I THOUGHT, "I'M ALIVE AND THAT'S WHAT MATTERS"'

this time, my family and friends were cosseting me in a cloud of love. I hung on to the strength of the people around me and somehow pulled through.

'Slowly, my world came back into focus. The first time they brought me a mirror to my bed, the head nurse carefully prepared me for the worst. But I didn't care. I wasn't too shocked by the puffy, distorted face I saw. I thought, "I'm alive, and that's what matters."

'For several months, I couldn't move at all. I lay there helplessly, hooked to a million tubes, while the bandages on every inch of my body were changed. I was turned from side to side regularly; the pain was excruciating.

'It may sound strange, but there was a lot of laughter around my bed. Tal, my two sisters and my parents kept their tears for later. Only once, through a haze of

morphine, I saw my mum hunched over in a chair, shoulders heaving, out of control. I'll never forget that.

'Five months later, I progressed to the hospital's rehabilitation centre. In rehab, there's a saying: "The more you get out of danger, the harder it gets." This is when things began to really sink in: I had to start my life from scratch. I couldn't go to the bathroom or get undressed on my own.

'After a year in hospital, I went to live at my mother's house. I had a nurse at my side 16 hours a day and a daily routine of bathing, massaging and physiotherapy. I looked like the Elephant Man. My face was scarred and very swollen. I had to wear a pressure suit for two years in order to flatten out my scars. It's like wearing something twice as tight as a condom over your whole body. My friends called me Robocop ►

◀ Woman because of the jerky movements I would make.

'At first, I got frustrated and angry with everyone because they have skin and I don't. In my quieter moments, I would sit and stroke my sisters' skin, trying to recall my own. I got pitying looks and horrified glances wherever I went, but my friends were there from the beginning, my own special diamonds of humanity, going out with me when I was up to it, staying with me in the house when it was just too hard for me.

'One of my best friends, Gregory, had been abroad at the time of the bombing, and came back to Israel a year and a half later. I was apprehensive about his reaction. I jumped on him but he pushed me away, held me at arm's length, looked me in the eye and said, "I want to see if you're still there." Then he said, "OK, Kinneret, this is you. Now give me a hug." This is one of my most beautiful memories. My outer appearance was no big deal for him, and I felt lovely.

'It was very important to me to collect all the details about what happened, so one evening I sat down with a guy who'd also been injured in the bombing. I'll never forget the look of horror in his eyes as he relived the blast. It made me realise that I'm blessed, because I don't remember. I sleep at night, whereas he can't get the screaming out of his head.

'I eventually moved back to the apartment Tal and I had shared. Sadly, we broke up a few months later. We'd both been through the bombing in different ways and it had changed us. I didn't have anything to give and he couldn't live like that any more. Weirdly, it didn't feel like the end of the world. Nothing is the end of the world. I do feel ready for a new relationship, but the right man hasn't come along yet.

'At the end of 2005, I went to New York with my cousin and, for the first time since the bombing, I didn't feel different, I was just

'To the Terrorist'

Think about me having
a father and mother
And a little brother and a sister
just like you.

Think about how happy they were
when I was born
and how they
wanted only the
best for me
just like you.

Think that somewhere in the world
love and a family await me
just like you.

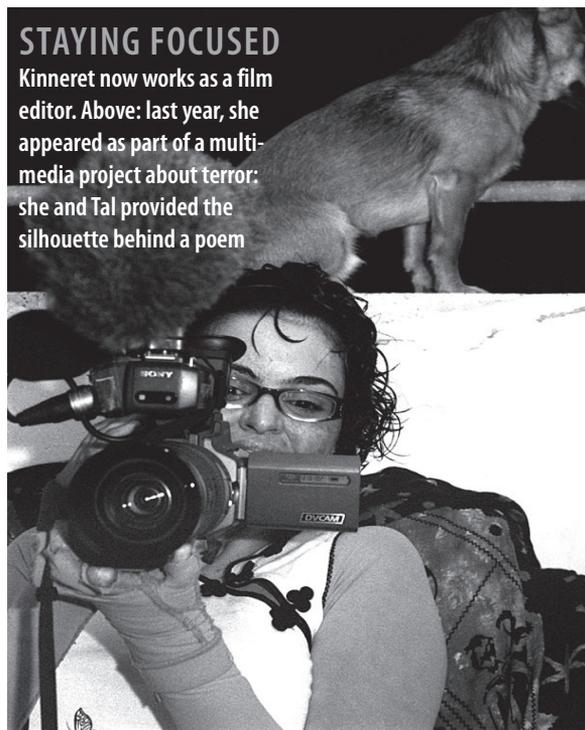
Think about all that -
before you blow yourself up.

© By Nava Semel, from 'The Courage to be Afraid'
(poetry book for children)

'I'M SURE THE SUICIDE BOMBER'S MOTHER MISSES HIM, EVEN THOUGH SHE HAS SAID SHE'S GLAD HE DID IT'

STAYING FOCUSED

Kinneret now works as a film editor. Above: last year, she appeared as part of a multimedia project about terror: she and Tal provided the silhouette behind a poem



another person on a big street. All my life, I'd wanted to be unique, and now all I wanted was to be normal. I was beginning to feel alive and it was good. I even had a one-night stand. Today, I wouldn't let anyone touch me without love, but at the time I badly needed to know that I was still a woman.

'When I got back, an amazing television producer came to visit. She'd heard about me and asked: "Do you want to do something with your life, or do you just want to hang out in hospitals?" She knew I'd studied film in high school, so she sent me on an editing course. I took to it straight away and now I'm doing freelance editing.

'People expect me to be obsessed by the bomber, but I'm not. I believe he was brainwashed and, unfortunately, many Palestinians are at a point where they feel they have nothing to lose. I'm sure his mother misses him like crazy, although she said on TV that she's happy her son martyred himself.

'I still have a helper for six hours a day. There are two air conditioners in the house to keep my body heat down. If I need to go out, I take a big sunshade with me. I still have a plastic bag with a few of my favourite clothes from before the bombing stashed away in the cupboard, but I don't cry over them any more. I spend a lot of time at the rehabilitation unit, helping burns victims. When your whole body itches, the only people who understand the agony are those who've been through it. I am getting on with my life.

'I'm not afraid of bombs when I go out, just people. We live in a society that gives a lot of attention to appearances, and I went from being the girl that everyone stares at because she's so pretty to the girl that everyone stares at because she looks so horrifying. The staring still bothers me, but now I only get upset for half an hour, not half the week. And, five years later, I do look much better. Time does heal scars, literally. ■