

Death in Norway; Dinner in Jerusalem

My last evening in Israel, I am to go to Jerusalem.

She says sternly, "I drive to Jerusalem to drop off the kid by friends."

She doesn't offer a ride. I ask if she is offering; an ambiguous, brief oblique nod and blink suggests yes. (She blinks agreement with a brief downward nod, as did my father, beneath his Neanderthal brow, one I inherited.)

The trip in her tinny Subaru is a hectoring voyage by some post-biblical prophet, a Jeremiah dressed in soft, rippling cotton. As the road rises to meet Jerusalem, as the heat works itself, as the car strains both to run up hill and to air condition, she turns up the heat on me.

Hadn't I realized -- she starts -- that I had fostered the children's misbehavior at the restaurant, even the dog retching? In France, dogs are permitted in restaurants and behaved. This was a shame onto God. In France they are taught behavior, formality in public, Jewish kids especially. She is trying to import that on her son in this country, where his friends run amuck, roil others at restaurants, malls. How could I counteract this, encourage them, feed the dog beneath the patio table?

This continues until she notices -- as we pass the slot of *Shar Hagai*, where skeletal armored trucks of '48 observe us, gape with empty orbits where headlamps once sat -- the last incline before entering the Holy City -- the car labors. Stuttering, barely moving, hardly budging, like some proof of Einsteinian relativity we seem to stand still, as cars to the left blur by, and cars and trucks behind refuse to pass, honk. In the rearview mirror, I see

the drivers make the palm-up, opposed fingers to thumbs, the Israeli gesture that could mean “What’s up?” or “Nu?” or “Move it!” Like some religious celebrants entering the Holy city, we were, but, they honking rather than blowing shofars. She is frustrated and upset to hold others back from their ascent into this Holiest of cities.

I reach, punch the AC button “off” and the car lurches forward, as if flung by some unseen godly sling shot into traffic’s mainstream, or like Elijah on his chariot, towards the Holy Mount.

Impressed, the prophetess quiets.

We will meet for dinner, in Naholot Shiva, she offers; well, commands. After she delivers her son. At this cramped coven of alleys, the biblical seven wadis once met. So, we would meet.

She re-appears. Distraught. She thought only to get *Le Monde* at the French bookstore on Agron opposite the Moslem cemetery. To catch up in her mother tongue, she intended. Only to read, front page, that a French friend, Marie Troyant, had been murdered by her lover as she was rehearsing in Norway. He, a rock singer of a group, *Las Grimas Sangre*, beat her to death, disfigured her. Splattered with her blood, he was, anguished-faced. (Paparazzi catch this.) Seemed they had argued; a lover’s spat, he said.

Apparently, French women, of a certain class, are now catching up with married French men who kept women on the Left Bank. For, this famous singer had a husband and two children, but preferred to travel with her rock star boyfriend, who had pummeled her before. In the past, he had spared her face. S. had begged Marie to leave the boyfriend; they would

compare notes -- the women -- about who hit hardest, Wolfgang or rock star. Rock star won. Hands down, so to speak.

Michel got eight years and much play in the French press: after all, this was a crime of passion; he was an artist.

Oh, she? She was dead forever; her children, orphaned forever.

Michel had the last word. As he entered prison, he announced both his eternal love for Marie; also for her children. When he gets out, he said, he would fight their father for visiting rights with the children. Also, he would compose a song for Marie in prison. His love he claimed eternal.

She wasn't, though. Not eternal. Just dead.

(As rehabilitation, the press later reported, he starts a rock band behind bars – a Johnny Cash of the murder-set – La Visage Rouge, he calls them; remorseful felons now banged cymbals, beat drums, flogged horns, rather than faces.)

This I can't believe, even as I see the woman's face, front page. My last night of possibility with S. and she comes up with such a story. The boyfriend too was front page, a broken nose, like some mini-Belmondo. (Belmondo's son, an aspiring actor, outdid his father's nose: racing on a motorcycle, he amputated his leg. A peg leg bon vivant, he became, she tells me.) She apologizes, as she would be out of sorts. And she is. We sit in the well of the restaurant, the only table outdoors, an ancient grape vine suspended above. She smokes incessantly.

We descend the two hours from Jerusalem, now silently. The Subaru is built for downhill, escaping from the Holy City. We could have been the

Israeli bobsled team, two of us, slaloming down the Holy Hill, through the slot of Latrun, the eye-less tank relics catching our backside.

The turn off to my overly modest hotel, more a hostel, is an ill-paved, rutted path, unlit, dark. At the gate, I hesitate. I turn to thank her; while we may not see each other again, I appreciate an adopted family for two weeks: going to the beach with her, her son. And I say good night -- I never touch her, never kiss her.

On the plane, over Greece, I find an SMS message: "I treated you dreadfully. Come back."

So, I do.