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Driving Through the Minefields of Love

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On a frighteningly hot day in the summer of 1977, my father decided to take us on a trip to the place where we had laid my mother to rest two years before, on a desert plateau high above the Dead Sea. This excursion was to be unlike any other because it was the first time my father and I were going to take a trip with my new stepmother, Esther, and her two children, Avi and Elior. It made me uneasy. Why, of all places, were we going to make our first family outing a trip to my mother's grave?

'Are you sure you want to do this?' I nervously asked my father after we finished Shabbat dinner the night before we were to leave for Masada. 'Why don't we just go to the Israel War Museum in Tel Aviv for the day? We could go eat at the Olympia restaurant afterwards.' 'No child,' Elie smiled, patting me reassuringly on my fragile ten-year-old back. 'These people live in London. Even though Esther is an Israeli, her children don't know very much about where they come from. We must teach them. We'll go have a nice Moroccan dinner afterwards in Jerusalem as your reward for being a good boy. Okay?'

Despite my father's appeal to my patriotic sense of educating these *galutim* (Jews from the Diaspora) I couldn't get to sleep that night. I kept thinking about how uncomfortable the car would be, stuffed with young British Jews driving through the Judean desert on a blisteringly hot summer day. I worried that our love of the harsh Biblical landscape would be interpreted as quaint by my new family's cosmopolitan Diaspora sensibilities. I feared that we were going to alienate them by being open about the pain we still felt over the loss of my mother.

Sometime around midnight, I decided to get up and fish through my closet for my collection of Matchbox cars. When I finally found them, I put all of them in an empty green and gold colored Elite chocolate bar box, and took them out to the stairs. From the edge of the staircase I could hear that my father and Esther were still up. They were arguing with each other softly in Hebrew.

I couldn't quite tell what they were talking about because their bedroom door was closed. But judging from the tone of the conversation, it sounded heated enough that I knew it would be a bad idea to turn on the lights in the hallway—

they'd most likely discover that I was awake, and then they would turn their frustration with each other on me.

In the half-light, I slowly unpacked my cars and lined them up at the very top of the typically Mediterranean, cheap marble staircase. Once I had finished making sure that their front bumpers were all carefully aligned with one another, I methodically began pushing each one of them off the edge. As I made my way down the lineup, I began to push them harder and harder, so that by the end I was literally throwing them all the way down the stairs.

By the time I was done, the entire staircase was littered with the upside down shells of all my toy cars. Scared that I'd be heard if I began walking downstairs to pick them up, I left them lying there, thinking that I'd get up earlier than everyone else and clean it all up before my midnight activities had been discovered. It proved to be wishful thinking.

The next morning I was awoken by a very loud shriek. Avi had gotten up before me and had gone to the kitchen to drink hot chocolate. On his way down the stairs, he'd stepped on one of my toy cars, and had been sent flying. I couldn't be quite certain, but judging from the tenor of his wounded-animal like yell, I could tell that I'd upset him. 'Mami, Mami,' I could hear Avi yelling, 'Yoel hurt me with his cars!'

Cowering in fear behind my bedroom door, I could hear Esther running out of her bedroom door, breathless, looking down at her son laying on his side at the bottom of the stairs. 'Yoel,' she yelled, 'Come here right now and clean this mess up.' Scared, I put on my shorts and sandals, collected my Elite chocolate box, and walked sheepishly out my bedroom door. Esther looked down at me disdainfully, trembling. Patches of her dyed orange hair were falling over her face. She pulled a dark brown cigarette out of the pocket of her Mrs. Robinson-look-alike faux-leopard skin nightgown, lit it, and stared at me. Her hands were shaking; 'Mami, Mami,' Avi moaned from below, 'I think my arm is broken.'

'Some way to inaugurate our first family road trip,' I thought to myself. I got on my knees and slowly started to collect my dangerous miniature automobiles. I was in really big trouble.

By the time I'd finished putting my toy cars away, my father had gotten breakfast ready. 'Yoel,' he called up to me, 'we're ready to eat.' I was nervous about putting in an appearance. I knew that everyone except my father would resent my presence at the dining room table. But he knew I was acting out and chose to ignore it. 'There you are kiddo,' he warmly intoned as I sat down, 'I made you your favorite: scrambled eggs and donkey salami.' I was delighted. Elie had decided not to punish me.

We sat there eating in silence. Esther sipped her coffee and stared out at the Arab laborers walking down the street, off to build a new Jewish home in yet another depressing subdivision of Savyon, the rapidly growing wealthy suburb

of Tel Aviv that we lived in. My father busied himself with yesterday's newspaper. Elior periodically kicked me under the table, whispering under her breath, 'You stupid ass,' in her English private school accent. Avi appeared to be doing just fine. The arm he claimed my toy cars had broken was miraculously stuffing my father's fried meat and egg combination down his long, whiny throat. I looked at it carefully and thought about how much I wish he'd really broken something.

Finally I decided to break the silence. 'When do we leave for the Dead Sea?' I asked. 'Soon child, soon,' my father replied, staring ever more intently into Friday's *Ha'aretz*. 'Do you think we'll hit another donkey again?' I asked, hoping to get a positive response out of someone at the table. 'Donkey, what donkey, Elie?' Esther replied, sounding rather concerned.

Elie shot a sharp glance at me from across the table. I could tell he was pissed that I had chosen to relate this particular story. 'We hit a donkey at a hundred kilometers an hour last time we drove to Masada,' I said with perverse delight. I could hear my father gripping his newspaper tightly. 'A Bedouin shepherd was moving his flock of animals across the old Roman road near Abu Mousa, but one of his donkeys decided to remain behind.'

Turning slightly red, my father decided to take over the situation, fearful that if he didn't, I might make things even worse than I already had by opening my big, egg and salami filled mouth. 'And we hit the stupid idiot straight in the ass,' he proudly proclaimed. 'If you can believe it, the car was completely unharmed. But the poor creature flew straight up in the air, landed behind us, and headed straight back for Jerusalem.'

Lighting her second cigarette, Esther asked if we could drive a little more carefully this time. My father gripped me under the table by the knee. It was then that I knew I'd manage to piss everyone off that morning. Feeling like my destiny with my new family was completely out of control, I grabbed my new plastic American skateboard out of the hall closet, ran out the front door and repeatedly jumped the curb in front of our house into oncoming traffic.

Peugeot's parted to my right. Mercedes taxicabs moved quickly to my left. Seamlessly, I wove my small, agile body in between them, congratulating myself on my dexterity and skill in courting death. The problem was that no one except the oncoming traffic that I was taunting ever bothered to notice. Frustrated, I picked up my skateboard, turned on the front lawn sprinkler, and cried. I was really stressed out.

My father's voice interrupted this brief moment of self-pity. 'Yallah Yoel, it's time to go!' I turned off the water, slid my skateboard through the front door, and followed Avi and Elior into our brand new Italian automobile. 'You sit in the middle because you're the smallest,' Esther commanded. 'That's right,' echoed Avi. 'You have the shortest legs of the three of us, you belong in the

middle.' I took a deep breath, got in first, and felt the hot leather of a car heated by the early morning summer sun burn the bottom of my tanned thighs. 'Fuck you,' I muttered under my breath as I recoiled in pain from the boiling seats. No one heard me. Elie and Esther soon followed suit, on came the air conditioning, and off we went, speeding toward Jerusalem en route to our final destination, the plateau above the Dead Sea.

'Yoel, Melech [King] Israel,' sang Avi and Elior as we passed the old British military police station in Latrun. I asked them to shut up, so they sang the same chorus over and over again, getting louder with each stupid verse. I was being teased. I reached forward and tapped my father's shoulder, hoping he'd intercede. Without appearing to get involved in the conflict, Elie turned on the radio, and out blasted the British band Deep Purple's 'Smoke on the Water.' 'That's so cool!' yelled an excited Avi, humming the three infamous barré chords that identify this 1970s anthem about the burning of a concert venue in Montreux, Switzerland.

Soon enough Elior joined him, their arms forming air guitars as the song blared out of our car's speakers. Avi and Elior's rock and roll gesticulations grew wilder, their elbows smashing into each side of my face. I was miserable. Finally Esther yelled out, 'Will you kids quiet down? I can't even hear myself talking to Elie.' But her crazed offspring would just not stop. Finally she switched off the radio, and the car returned to silence. I tapped my father's shoulder again. His hand reached around the seat and grabbed my ankle, acknowledging my distress. It was worse than being stuck in the back of a school bus with the neighborhood bullies.

Two hours passed before we reached the outskirts of the Judean desert on the other side of Jerusalem. The old Roman road was crowded with aging, occupied territory-plated Mercedes trucks carrying food and commercial goods from Bethlehem and the West Bank down to Jericho. Much to my stepmother's chagrin, my father put his pedal to the metal to get around them. Like me on my skateboard two hours earlier, Elie wove an intricate, seemingly suicidal pattern on the two-lane highway around these hulking behemoths. Esther shrieked. Her children clapped with delight. My father's racecar driving ritual turned them on. I periodically fell on them as my father dramatically swerved right and then left to avoid oncoming traffic approaching us in the passing lane.

'Elie, Elie, slow down, would you?' intoned Esther. 'Don't worry child, I'm an excellent driver,' my father replied. 'Besides, we're running short on time and there's this place I wanted to take you before it gets too hot.' Suddenly, Elie took an abrupt right turn, and took us up the beginnings of a very steep dirt and stone road, right up the side of a hill covered in flocks of Bedouin sheep looking for non-existent foliage to graze on. Recalling my story of our collision

with the donkey, Esther cried out, 'Careful Elie, careful.' 'Listen child,' answered Elie, 'I've been up and down these roads since I was a teenager. We used to hide out from the British army here.'

Everyone gripped their seats in terror. I sat in the middle where there was nothing I could really hold onto, so I abandoned myself to being thrown to and fro between the laps of my larger stepsiblings. Angry at my constant crash landings in their soft, adolescent laps, Avi and Elior tossed me back and forth at one another, while the sounds of large rocks hit the bottom of our new Alpha Romeo. It was built for high-speed driving on the smooth highways of Italian autostradas, not the rugged, stony dirt roads of a barren Biblical geography. 'Why didn't you buy a Jeep?' yelled Esther over the atonal Judean symphony. My father shot her a sharp look and said nothing. Nervous, Esther lit a cigarette, and fumbled through her purse for a cassette to drown out the din of the increasingly crazy voyage we'd all embarked on.

Stumbling upon a copy of British pop singer Tom Jones' *Greatest Hits*, she promptly put it on to shield her ears from the sounds of rocks scraping the bottom of her husband's brand new car. 'What's New Pussycat?' immediately exploded out of the speakers, drowning out the *sturm und drang* of our noisy ascent, as cheap Israeli *Time* cigarette smoke filled the back of our small, fragile automobile. We all began to cough. Esther refused to open her window for fear of all the sand and dust blowing in. Besides, she argued, we had the air conditioning on. It was too hot outside to even think of such a possibility. Rendered silent by the extremity of the proceedings, the lack of air, the constant heaving back and forth, and the combined volume of Tom Jones singing 'Woah, Woah, Woah, Woah,' I felt like I was going to faint.

I was saved from lapsing into unconsciousness when we reached the summit. Elie finally slowed down and we began our sightseeing tour. 'Over there,' he gestured, pointing to a Bedouin camp, 'is where we would hide out as teenagers in the Haganah. From their encampment you can see the road to Jerusalem on your left, Jericho up a bit further, and the Dead Sea and Jordan right in front of you.' Esther was not amused. Avi strained to look out the dusty car window. Elior moaned that from her position she could not see a thing. Sitting in the middle of the back seat, I had the only view that gave me a perspective similar to my father's.

I was excited. My dad and I were alone in our enjoyment of the fruits of our first extended family outing, just as we had been before his remarriage. But it wasn't destined to last very long. As the car continued to roll south across the high desert plateau, an army Jeep sped toward us. When they reached our car, one of them yelled out with a bullhorn for us to stop. An officer clad in a fresh green Israeli army uniform and World War II-era aviator's sunglasses asked my

father to roll down his window. ‘Slichah,’ [‘excuse me’] the officer said in Hebrew, ‘didn’t you read the sign?’ My father looked around, pretending not to see the large multilingual billboard in front of us. ‘You’ve started to drive through a minefield. I’d advise you to turn around immediately unless you are planning on taking a quick trip to the cemetery.’