

# In pursuit of the Fourth Horseman

Late last summer I fell in love. We spent the fall intoxicated by each other and how effortlessly our lives seemed to intertwine. Once we felt comfortable, we made plans to introduce each other to our respective families. Being the typical Bay Area transplants we are, that meant traveling. All of my siblings lie scattered between Miami and Maine. And my parents live in a well-to-do beach town located halfway between Tel Aviv and Haifa, appropriately named Ceaesaria.

I proposed that we take a trip to Israel. Mary gladly agreed. My parents, knowing how difficult it is to try to conduct a normal family life at such great distances, were ecstatic. We decided to arrive in Israel Dec. 29, after spending Christmas with Mary's family in Davis.

Everything had gone marvelously there. It had been the first time I'd ever experienced a happy Christmas with a family that didn't make me feel alienated for being Jewish. Granted, Mary's family is not the least bit religious. Her mother comes from a Protestant background, her stepfather a Jewish one, and her sister-in-law, also present, comes from a secular Bengali family. Obviously the combination of cultures and personalities involved was part of what made my first Christmas in nearly 21 years of living in America finally feel inclusive. But even more important, it was being so deeply in love. I couldn't have asked for a better combination of circumstances. I felt totally on top of the world, so to speak.

Unfortunately, like America, Israel can't help but remind one how illusory such fleeting experiences of utopia can be. Nothing drove this feeling of estrangement home harder than our first full day in the so-called Holy Land. Eager to show Mary my favorite parts of the region, I decided to drive us to the Golan Heights. "You've never seen anything like it," I told her. "It's absolutely stunning. And we're about to give it back to the Syrians." Soon enough, we were in my father's '89 Peugeot, stopping for bottled water at a gas station on the outskirts of the working-class immigrant town of Hadera.

As we began our ascent into the Carmel Mountains and started driving through a corridor of Arab villages about to be handed over to the Palestinian Authority, I noticed that an aging VW Rabbit was playing chicken with my rear. I tried to get out of its way, but the car kept on tailing me. We started to get very nervous. Whenever I switched lanes, so did the car behind us. And it kept on getting closer. Fearing we were going to get rammed, I decided to slow down so as to allow the car to pass me. Instead, it pulled alongside me so closely that its driver and I could look one other in the eye.

"Asshole Israeli," I yelled, giving him a very visible middle finger. Our harasser kindly replied by flashing a

pocketknife at us, screaming. As I vainly attempted to drop behind him, I noticed that the interior of his car was very elegantly decorated in a way that boring Jewish-owned cars just aren't. All of a sudden it dawned on me: this guy was Palestinian. My heart sank. Catching on to my evasive logic, he decelerated too. A car chase was on, between me, a shaved-headed Jew, on vacation with his tattooed and pierced American girlfriend, driving his dad's French sedan, and an enraged Arab behind the wheel of a rusting German mini-car.

I immediately gunned the accelerator, but our potential assailant remained right behind us. Frightened beyond belief, I gripped the wheel so tightly my knuckles turned white. I prayed that we'd lose our friend before we approached a military police station full of heavily armed border troops on the other side of the mountain range. God knows what would have happened if they'd taken notice. But I still thought of alerting them, regardless of how ambivalent I was about seeking out their assistance.

All of a sudden we reached a four-way intersection leading to the village of Umm Al-Fahhm, where the Israeli army ignited riots the year before when it confiscated Palestinian-owned orchards for a new firing range. I wondered if the man chasing us came from there. Given what had transpired the year before, what was happening to us made a lot of sense. At that very same moment I looked in my rearview mirror and saw the VW making a rapid right turn into town. Fearful that this was a ruse, I continued to accelerate until we passed the military police station and descended into the Valley of Jezre'el, where, according to the Book of Revelations, Armageddon was supposed to take place the very next day. As Biblical fate would have it, doomsday would not arrive before its time. There was no knife-wielding Palestinian chasing us anymore.

Two weeks later, as we listened to *All Things Considered*, Mary and I were reminded of our stalker once again. Someone had detonated several nail bombs in a crowded shopping area in Hadera. More than 20 people were wounded. Not just Jews but local Palestinian shoppers from the Carmel Mountains, too. I wondered if the man who had chased us was among them. Or he could quite possibly be the person who had assembled the explosives. I shook my head and told myself I'd never know.

That same evening, as Mary and I curled around each other and began to fall asleep, I swore to myself that the time of letting the outside world into our lives was over. I gripped Mary's warm body tightly, hoping to get back that utopian moment I'd experienced at Christmas. Love does indeed conquer all, I thought. Well, maybe just in certain instances. ❖

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