

JOSHUA LEVY

LEAVING THE KIBBUTZ

I WOKE COVERED WITH SWEAT. My roommate was snoring in his bed; face towards the wall, shirtless, his yellow boxers ill-fitting. It was still dark. The moon penetrated our window and drew chalk-white outlines around everything. Everything was me, him, a white wooden table between our beds, an empty bag of potato chips on the floor, my guitar case, his silver box filled with hand-rolled cigarettes, and his collection of war posters taped to the walls. I jumped from my bed and crossed the room barefoot, careful not to step on a scorpion leaving his hideout for a bit of fresh air. I splashed cold water on my face, brushed my teeth, unpacked a shirt and shorts from my duffle bag by the door and got dressed. Then I grabbed my guitar case and left.

The village was still asleep. It was dry and hot. Quiet. A few shacks, yellow flowers, a table strewn with plastic cups and an empty vodka bottle on its side were unevenly illuminated by security lights hung from tree limbs. I retrieved my shoes from a pile by the door and found a praying mantis, green as Zionist grass and doubled over like a pious Muslim moving his mouth in prayer. I shook the shoe until it dropped out, schlepped my things to the payphone, ordered a cab, and walked to the shack opposite my own.

We came as strangers: Germans, Americans, Guatemalans, Swedes. We came as stereotypes, but gradually individuality found a way of breaking through. Most weren't even Jewish, but were attracted by free room and board in exchange for their hands in the fields and a flake of communist nostalgia under the tongue. Some were trying to find themselves; others were trying to escape. We devoted hours to the beach: final resting place of the Mediterranean, studying the waves crawling onto the sand on torn knees: exhausted from splashing with Spanish fleets, diving under French bathers' legs, being kicked by Italy's boot and sliced to shreds by the jaws of large fish. The faces and names lined up: Jared, from Boston; Vera, from Russia; Pia, from Denmark.

I took out a sheet of paper and wrote quickly in the middle of the page:

Pia, why did you have a boyfriend tucked away back home like a bookmark to your past?

Then I stuffed the paper under the door and hurried to the paved road leading out of town.

At the front gate, I bumped into the night security guard, a broad man with a scar down his neck and a rifle on his lap. He was leaning back in his chair, smoking a cigarette.

“Better not go out,” he said.

“Why?”

“Still dark.”

And he pointed his lit cigarette down the road, like a tiny flashlight.

“Going home,” I said.

He shrugged and brought the cigarette back to his lips.

“Your funeral.”

Headlights peeled the darkness, the car rolled to a stop and a man got out and helped me with my luggage.

“Ben Gurion Airport,” I said, once seated in the back.

He nodded and began to drive away from the kibbutz.

“How much?” I asked.

He scowled into the rear-view mirror.

“Two hundred shekels, agreed?” I said, louder.

Not much reaction.

I took two hundred shekels from my wallet and passed them up front. He counted the bills, smiled, and said something in Hebrew, of which I knew only a handful of crucial words.

We drove for over an hour in silence, the stars huddled in the sky and the moon-swept sea often visible out the windows. Soon, the sun appeared.

He pulled to the side of the road and fumbled under his seat. When his hands reappeared he was holding a machete and staring at me.

He got out of the car and motioned for me to do the same.

With the sun breaking through the clouds, I saw him for the first time: a sizeable man—both tall and wide—with bloodshot blue eyes capped by thick eyebrows, his clothing simple but dirty. The machete was in his right hand. He was licking his lips.

I looked around. An empty highway with long hills stretched along the left side. The hills were naked and brown. On my right was the sea, almost close enough to touch.

The cab driver stepped toward me. We were about three feet apart.
Two. One.

“What?” I said, but no sound came out.

He raised the blade to my face until I saw my reflection.

And, handing me the machete, he opened the trunk and removed a tray containing a thermos, cups, and an unwrapped hunk of orange cheese.

I was still alive. I looked around. It was getting light.

We stood behind the car and he poured us Turkish tea. With the knife, I cut uneven slices of cheese. We didn't talk. We faced the sea. A couple of jellyfish lay marooned in blue heaps, deflating their poison. The sun was in full bloom, pollinating the world. After a while, we cleaned up and got back on the road to the airport.

Looking out the window, I thought of Pia. I loved this time of day when the sun dribbled through her hair, luminous as a halo.