

THE NIGHTMARES OF SASHA

WEITZWOMAN

by Batya Weinbaum

Introduction.

I write this introduction in a small second story cement room overlooking the Pacific Ocean on the coast of Mexico, one beach west of Zipolite, the famous backpacker beach of fifteen years ago now more sufficiently settled. I am considerably older than I was when I began this novel. Too old to go backpacking, as do the young people I watch from my balcony roaming the beach in search of their spot, too old to go tooling around the world with all the essential important possessions as this character I wrote about once did. As I settled, I pursued a teaching career as this character was just beginning to think about doing. Doing so absorbed my writing energies, taking me off track from creating fiction for a number of years. I allowed this major piece of fiction to remain dormant for a period of time. Even so, I have had the success of a smattering of public readings in bookstores, over the radio, and at conferences. Plus, I have enjoyed the publication of several excerpts, and the publication of a collection of short stories by a women's press in California. All this validated me as a fiction writer throughout the dry years of publishing scholarship, writing proposals, and defending myself against a stream of blackballing memos. The latter ultimately freed me from the academic world and allowed me to return to write creatively once again, and hence to finish this major piece of work. The child that I was trying to conceive when I began this creative project you now hold in your hands now sits beside me, 13, reading book after book as I write. Sometimes she devours two books a day. She gets the soggy, dog-eared moldy volumes from collective shelves in hotels, restaurants, beach bars and the trading-lending library in this small town. Every morning I go for a walk on the beach and chant, *oseh shalom bimromav*, and dance to the Green Tara.

Why revise and publish this novel now? It seems so long ago. Seven reasons I can think of:

1. The novel you have just picked up somewhere was written at a time when women were braving the streets weekly to protest what was occurring in the Occupied Territories in Palestine/Israel. The women encouraged their government to talk to Arafat, to the PLO, and to give some of the territories back. Now Arafat is dead, the government has talked to and negotiated with the PLO, the State of Palestine has been created as an entity unto itself, and some of the territories have been returned. This history has happened. Nonetheless, the recording of voices otherwise not heard, whether in nonfiction or fiction, motivates my work. I wish to honor the women, who worked hard to bring about historical change, and to memorialize their impact on history.

2. I wish to do the same for the Holocaust survivors depicted in the novel, some of the inhabitants of the strangely bewitched cheap hotel, in which the main character finds herself living.

3. I record in a humanistic, symbolic manner how Mizrachi Jews suffer in a particular way, at the nexus between Jew and Arab in the Middle East.

4. I show furthermore how the projection of the American Dream onto Israel can be a distortion, as much a distortion as the Zionist Ghost hanging in the hotel rafters who haunts the main character.

5. I give voice to how Israeli sexual deviants suffered before the advent or import of gay liberation.

6. A desire to depict the great creative, absurd lengths to which Palestinians go to fight against stereotypes also motivated this book.

7. As did playfully documenting the unusual picaresque quest of going to find a father for a child if one is not regularly involved with men sexually, as this lesbian character does.

That list seems pretty good. OK, I'll finish it!

I earn money here by reading palms and cards. I tried to read for a man who was German, and from him I learned that the US was about to bomb Iran. The Iranian president declared that the Holocaust did not occur. Hence the record of Isaac, the Iranian Jew who holds the forte of Jewish nationalism in this book, remains important. His presence is present, though not in the news as Americans mount protest. Last night I threw the cards with my daughter on whether I should finish the book. A chest of gold coins said yes...

I have this thing for recording passing orders. Rachel the silent woman and the ghost of Isaac's mother deserve to be seen and heard.

I wish to thank the departed poet Ann Hawley of Amherst who came out to visit me in my apartment I had rented in Shelburne Falls and said how much she liked the manuscript, first suggesting it was picaresque and teaching me that term. I regret that I did not finish and bring the project to publication before she died. Remembering her kind words after she passed gave me encouragement to finish.

Grateful acknowledgements must also go to *Anything That Moves, In a Nutshell: An Anthology of Speculative Microfiction* (Ed. Toiya Finley), *Femspec*, *Jerusalem Romance*, *Lost on the Map of the World: Jewish Women Writers' Quest for Home* (ed Phillipa Kafka), *Magic Realism*, *Maydeleh*, and *Sinister Wisdom* for previous publications of sections, as well as the validation for imaginal research provided by my sojourn through Pacifica Graduate Institute in Carpinteria, CA. Thanks also to Robin Reid at International Association of Fantasy in the Arts, National Women's Studies Association, Black White and Re(a)d All Over at the Carpinteria Valley Arts Center, the radio station WGDR at Goddard, in Plainfield, VT, and the Shelburn Falls, MA, reading series for the opportunity to read from sections of the manuscript while in process.

I thank as well my daughter Ola, for coming along on this journey, for copyediting the previous draft as we traveled in Indonesia last winter, and for helping push me into the revisions, as well as for going down for the cinnamon iced coffee. And for putting up with the delicacies of where to hang the washed laundry to dry in one small hotel room or another as I chugged away on this version.

The non-linear reality of this exploration of the depths of human psyche in a warring situation is due in part to a much-appreciated residence at Ma'alot, where the *Zohar* was written, at HILAI (Israeli Center for the Creative Arts). The layering of past, present and future in Jerusalem as an enchanted Arab History book is placed in the cheap hotel room of a visiting American Jewish journalist most American readers will find fascinating. Yet unintentionally, this novel became a novel about the build up and aftermath of the First Gulf War. The war itself takes place outside the frame of the written text, except as it appears in memories during the aftermath and in the blank section. To understand the disintegration of character and disillusionment with place, read all the sections marked 1 from beginning to end, all the sections marked 2 straight through, and so on, reading all sections marked with the same numbers throughout the

book. You might also read all the sections of Correspondence as post-Deluvian scholars and editors debate the wisdom of publishing the historical document. To assist readers in reading non-linearly, I have included a Table of Contents.

SASHA WEITZWOMAN, the author of this book, has turned to following Torah. She burnt the original manuscript you are reading as blasphemous.

VOLUME ONE

SASHA'S HARLEM: *AT THE MAD HOTEL*

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Dear Blueberry and a Call to Dr. Z.

Correspondence from Erva Nasheet to Nan Bergdaughter, Venus 14, 2092.

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Remember that what we term fantasy is an attempt to understand what rational and daily experience fails to grasp: forces, notions, possibilities frequent in our every day lives; and that art is perhaps the most visible "return of the repressed."

Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*

Outside, rockets previously used to launch large-scale attacks on settlements in the Galilee¹ were discompassionately thrown into the sea. The soldiers were so desperate for women's energy that they were behaving irrationally. Meanwhile, as Sasha watched Haya sleep beside her, Haya's obsession, her hairbrush, was lying next to Sasha on the oriental cover draping the nightstand. Sasha realized, the Middle East perched precariously upon a powder keg of history, which most people, including herself, knew very little about. We could shout from abroad, Sasha thought as she rolled over, or come temporarily to do support work to ameliorate the situation. Sasha watched Haya breathing, not wanting to disturb, not wanting to tell her that nuclear capabilities had been found out...in this waking dream, beneath this waking dream, moved a sea of images possessing a reality all its own.

¹ North East Israel, in the area of the Sea of Kinneret bordering Syria.

From Another World...

1.

SOMETHING HAPPENED in Jerusalem.

She's not sure what.

All she is able to recall is approaching Isaac, that depository of sensual and deferred love, the proprietor of the hotel where she was staying back in Jerusalem on Allenby, a street one city and a couple of centuries over, in Tel Aviv. She approached Isaac somewhere near the Chinese dancer billboard in Hebrew by the Club Natural.² She had just gone to put Blueberry on a plane to San Francisco. Or was it Oakland? Anyway, to the States. From that far away, such differences seem very small. Blueberry was off in a rush to perform a wedding in Santa Cruz dressed in lavender silk jacket and butterfly tie. Blueberry's silk jacket was embroidered with the double women's insignia. A heavy Jewish star flopped around her neck, giving her legitimacy as a campus minister. But even as Sasha put Blueberry off at the *Lod* Airport,³ Blueberry ran her hand through her curly dark hair and sighed, "Look, I am just not into the maleness of the thing. You are. You stay. I'll go." Sasha kissed her. She was afraid to let go, even though they had fought on *Ben Yehuda*⁴ the day before in an ice cream shop when Blueberry had accused Sasha of wanting to become a breeder.

And then, just when she needed him, there was Isaac, her passion, her idealization.

Yes there she was in Tel Aviv having parted from Blueberry at *Lod*, and there was Isaac. An old expression in Hebrew, Isaac says, goes, "Anything you want you can find." Damn, where is the scrap of paper I wrote that on, Sasha wondered in a panic. She wanted to clutch his wisdom to her bosom.

It all seems so strange now. She thinks of Dr. Z. over at the hospital where she goes sometimes and the old woman who has checked in for depression 17 times who refers to him as an Arab. The old Vermont woman with yellowing hair explains, pulling tight her pink terry cloth bathrobe, over the growing sagging bulges of her flabby body, all she knows is, the doctor has velvet couches and exotically-embroidered pillow cases in his office. Sasha laughs as she unpacks her boxes a friend Alex drove up from Western Mass. for her, she couldn't afford the \$150 for the U-Haul.

Oh yes, perhaps I should tell you, Sasha had been living in this hotel in *Mea Shearim*,⁵ the most religious neighborhood in the overwhelmingly-religious Jerusalem in which Isaac's hotel was situated, because the price was all she could afford under the circumstances. Alex had been saying she shouldn't live in cheap places just because of the rent, but as she had learned, this is what one has to do in certain periods. There

² Gay bar in Tel Aviv, Allenby district.

³ International airport outside Tel Aviv.

⁴ Street in downtown West Jerusalem.

⁵ Literally in Hebrew, 100 gates. Neighborhood in West Jerusalem now dominated by black coats, or ultra-religious (*hayardeem*). One of the earliest settlements outside the Old City's gates.

was her Coney Island period, her Makenna Beach⁶ period, her blue period, her mood period; this was her Jerusalem period, and there she was at Isaac's because of the rent.

Isaac's was full of love. Not religious love, for he too was being chased out of the religious neighborhood by the rabbis. But he would not leave. I will be here always, he told her, when she left him.

She had stayed there for months, or years, or maybe it was only weeks. The place had a certain timelessness to it, in air and appearance. The building stood three or four stories tall, wide and open, she seemed to remember yellow brick; and the feeling was palatial. A young man tirelessly working there was named Shaia, but this was pronounced "Shy;" so that is what I will call him here from now on. Shy sported black curls down the side of his cheeks. He would sit in white shirt and black pants, his right eye bigger than the left, very thin, very patient, ceaselessly repairing damaged parchment in *Torah*⁷ after *Torah*. Every once in awhile Isaac's half-senile mother, the founder of the establishment, who had years ago led the family by caravan out of Persia, because she had a dream, would come out of the back room. The old woman would flail down the corridor, her two white braids curling down around her ankles with fresh *kubeh*⁸ stains on the front of her floor-length white gown carrying a flaming red *menorah*⁹ in the shape of a peace dove in her right hand. The servant in *pardah*,¹⁰ Rachel, with red bedroom slippers three times the size of her feet, would flail after her mistress Mama, gnarled hands on hips, freckled face, bundled in layers of sweaters and scarves, mumbling.

Isaac would be counting money in the back.

Sasha had become used to coming home every day for months from her job where she worked in a home for cripples. Isaac had fixed up this job for her. "Cripples" was his expression; so quaint to hear such a word.

Her wiring home to publishers to find an advance for a book only ended up costing more than it was worth.

⁶ Hippie beach in 70s and 80s in Maui where many lived in a permanent (often nude) encampment.

⁷ Jewish holy scrolls forming the original books of the Old Testament.

⁸ A stuffed fried meat sausage, popular among Jews from Arabic countries in Israel.

⁹ Candelabra with eight candles for *Chanukah*, the December gift-giving ritual holiday of the Jews which commemorates the holding fort of the Macabees and the miracle of light.

¹⁰ The seclusion of women from the sight of men or strangers practiced by Muslims and some Hindus, in India, Pakistan, the Middle East, *etc.* Also can refer to a veil or screen used to accomplish this purpose.

WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH YOU, CAN'T YOU FIND ANY PALESTINIANS¹¹? one major editor faxed back.

So, when she came home from this job, sometimes she looked happy, sometimes she looked sad. As Isaac had insisted, she was always wearing dresses so the rabbis in the neighborhood wouldn't throw stones at her or set the place on fire with kerosene. However she appeared, Isaac, if he wasn't busy counting travelers checks, settling disagreements between day and night managers, or making phones work for some tourist behind his ivory inlaid olive wooden desk, would look up.

For example, one day she came home upset from the Old City¹² after a talk with a Christian father from France, an older man in a long black-belted skirt to the ground wearing a white collar. He had told me, the government closed the school he was teaching in at noon. Why? He didn't know. When Sasha got home, Isaac explained to her, "They use the Christian *Torah*¹³ to teach anti-Semitism."

"But he's from France," she answered him.

"So, don't they have anti-Semitism in France?" Isaac bantered back.

Their eyes met and they laughed. Sasha laughed because she hadn't gone to Israel to work in a home for so-called "cripples" –even the term offended her. Or to live in a religious neighborhood wearing floral dresses, walking home past women pushing babies in carriages and telling her to pull down her skirt on the bus. Nor had she gone to Israel to sit across from Shy in *payes*¹⁴ and *tallis*¹⁵ and pale white skin which looked like he had never seen the light of day. Once or twice, though, she knew he had left the neighborhood and even went to Williamsburg in Brooklyn, which he thought of as America, on business occasionally. To the contrary, Sasha had gone to Israel to find a father for her child.

So, as I was telling you, right there in front of Sasha on the streets in Tel Aviv, that fateful day she put Blueberry off on a plane to America, was Isaac. As usual, he had on tan shorts, shirt open to the chest, and no *kippah*,¹⁶ which for his neighborhood made him stand out at best. She looked at him wordlessly. She

¹¹ In this case, specifically the Arab population of territories won by Israel in the '67 war. They went into Diaspora or became a minority after the establishment of the Jewish State, having lived there before the existence of Israel under the British.

¹² Walled city of the old Jerusalem.

¹³ Reference to the New Testament.

¹⁴ Curls of long hair growing below the ears on male *Chasidic* Jews.

¹⁵ Prayer shawl, usually worn by Jewish men, with strings on the end called *tzitzit* which represent the strands of the outer personality as well as the laws of God.

¹⁶ In Hebrew, prayer hat. Skull cap traditionally worn by Jewish men.

was about to ask, but she couldn't. There were plenty of hotels around. She could--Even as she hesitated she knew he would say, that's the problem with you American Jewry. Come back to Jerusalem permanently. Make *Aliyah*.¹⁷ Don't you see this arid Americanism has ruined you?

Of course, she couldn't do anything even relatively permanently or she'd feel trapped. But Isaac didn't know that. So for awhile she became sort of an underground outlaw immigrant. No official papers or anything like that. An immigrant. She hadn't been able to mouth the word out loud or to herself for months. A fourth generation American Jew, an immigrant to Sasha was a person from decades ago, ancient family buried forgotten history.

But if she had asked Isaac right then, instead of giving up on the point of her journey and going home to the Alternative Insemination Clinic on the Fenway in Boston, would he have whisked her away in the last collective taxi? Would they have gone back to his precious beautiful palatial building which for years and perhaps even centuries had been a *mekkah*¹⁸ for incoming Jews from Middle Eastern countries? Would they have made love in the special room upstairs, unheeded by the unruly appearance of 50 rabbis to beat down the doors and badger the night watchman because Sasha hadn't been dressed properly? Would Isaac have carried her up the stairs to the special room, the room in which Shy kept all his holy parchments? Would Isaac have thrown her on the bed? And on this bed, would there have been a blue velvet covering like the one on Sasha's childhood-memory encased *Torah*? With diamonds and rubies embroidered, and gold threading?

...and on this bed... would she slow down, and feel her body spaciouly glowing, feeling head to toe as if she were special priceless ivory, and on the bed would she realize that she had floated gradually, and that he hadn't thrown her. Would she find herself in bed, wanting him, so potent, so vibrant like a holy glow? Something emanating, not just him, an aura, all around -- and as she touched him would he jump, jerk with joy, for would he be naked all of a sudden,

and would there be satins

on the floor,

bolts of white satin,

for Shy does his repair work in there.

And as she touched Isaac, would his chuckle become deeper?

And would waves of laughter...

Yes, waves of laughter would ripple out of both of them as she would say,

¹⁷ Literally, "coming up" in Hebrew; in Israel, the term refers to claiming ones' new immigrant status as a Jew. In a religious sense, the term refers to going up to say a blessing on the *Torah* before it is read, which is a high honor in the Jewish religion only recently opened to women.

¹⁸ Refers to a religious site to visit, in Islamic religion. Here used facetiously, as the hotel was obviously not a formal religious site or object of pilgrimage but a convenient stopover.

"I want your strength, Isaac. Your bristling, your
holding fort, your fighting off the opposition.

You have so much to teach me
from all these many lost years.

I want you, the ancient Jew in you. You are so

clear about who you are, you who have never wandered in western
civilization.

I want none of those speeches made at home by confused poets with names like
b-e-r-n-s-t-e-i-n

who feel guilty because they are white

when only some years ago whites put rats in our vaginas

and gassed us and burnt us. And on the way you say good-bye,

I will always be here,

Isaac, I want you,

you are a martyr,

our mothers were martyrs in America,

they were noble and suffering and we want nobility

nobility

And suffering."

But is it my imagination, or did Sasha hear

"Thou shalt love,

"The Lord thy God,

"God of Abraham, Isaac

“and Jacob,” every time Isaac thrust himself inside of her just before the explosion?

With this voice out of nowhere booming, each thrust harder and harder,

intensifying the shooting,

reaching her

fingertips

and palms,

forcing her

to clutch to the sheets,

straining

to the white satin sheets

below the velvet,

to open herself to receive the blessings,

down to the bottoms of her feet.

Every cell and molecule
must have burst open inside.

She remembers him turning her on her knees,
pulling up her body,

his large textured

porous hand and brazen arm encircling her ivory glowing waist.

And as he came

from behind, one hand under her left breast over her heart,

she distinctly heard a

large voice booming,

“I am the Lord

“thy God...”

(She heard a voice

boom) “God of...”

(the voice bellowed) “God of...”

Sasha remembered the Arab cleaning man unsuspecting of the unlikely inhabitants of the *Torah* Fix-it Room trying to enter and clean. Isaac neither saw nor heard him. He didn't stop. The young man was invisible to Isaac, but not to her.

“Isaac,” Sasha said, “tomorrow can you lend me the family car, and the cleaner?”

Isaac stopped heaving. “Why?”

“I'm going to the West Bank to interview a Palestinian.”

Isaac fell asleep, or feigned so.

Sasha needled him. “Listen to me,” he finally said, aroused. “Give up your commitments, your ties. Stop trying to write books. At least you have to read more first. The Jews and the Christians are trained to love. The Arabs, to kill. They scream DEATH TO THE JEWS when they come running out of their mosques. All you writers from America seem to forget that.”

Isaac rolled over, back to her. She looked at the inlaid mahogany bedposts surrounding them.

“Well, Isaac,” Sasha nudged. “All this doesn't show on our television and doesn't make our headlines. All we hear is that our people close the mosques on Easter. How do you think that makes us feel?”

The lump softened slightly. "Well, you're here, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am trying to understand."

He rolled over to grasp her. "And about moving here?"

She pushed him off and asked, "Why should I move where you say three million people are trying to kill us?"

"Why?" Isaac laughs. "Because you are a Jew."

This time, after he was finished, Sasha knew she distinctly heard a violin on the roof. No question. This was not her wild imagination. She went up to check. And when she went up, she flew off with the over-sized peasant-looking fiddler and they hovered, Sasha sitting naked on his back, over one of the neighborhood's infinite number of *shuls*¹⁹ and synagogues. They rode on the crest of the waves of the *Shabbas*²⁰ singing and *davenning*,²¹ the way *gringos* on sawed-off boards rode the surf off the Oaxacan coast of the Mexican Pacific at Zipolite. But over Jerusalem, the giant peasant fiddler leaned over and let Sasha slide down. She landed on the *bimah*,²² her body still glowing in ivory. She spread her legs, naked on the *bimah*, far apart. At last she understood, as the men continued to *daven* and didn't see her, why women didn't have to read the books. Women were the books. We contained the mystery. We were the *Zohar*,²³ the *Koran*,²⁴ the Bible.

2.

¹⁹ Orthodox places of worship, usually small, and opened daily if there are ten men for a minion.

²⁰ A Jewish religious holiday, every seventh day, in which everything is supposed to be shut down according to God's rules. Hence the twenty four hours becomes a personal social period to reconnect with the dawn of creation through creating and deepening ties with family and friends, since everything secular and commercial is closed. This spelling is Yiddish. The Israeli spelling used by the non-religious is *Shabbat*. The holiday is Sabbath to Christians but theirs usually means Sunday whereas this begins at sundown Friday night and lasts through sundown Saturday night. Even to the non-religious, it is a time of rest.

²¹ In Judaism, this means rocking back and forth while taking small steps and reciting prayers.

²² Altar for placement of Jewish prayer scroll in synagogue.

²³ Jewish book of mysticism written in Safat in northern Israel.

²⁴ Holy book of Islam.

ISAAC LOOKED OUT his balcony with the new boy's borrowed binoculars. He thought he finally saw her. He strained to make out the faces, one by one, around the circle of Women in Black²⁵ activists protesting the government policies concerning the Occupation.²⁶ He hated them. This time, if she came, he would have to tell her, if she went to stand with them, or even to talk to them, he would have to ask her to leave the hotel. Steve his night manager had warned him the last time, but Isaac hadn't listened. What harm could come from a mere woman interviewing, he had asked. Isaac strained through the thick binoculars to see if he could locate the 30s-something American woman who had made him shed twenty years of his acquired age. He remembered his reserve duty in northern *Ma'alot*, a development town near the border with Lebanon when children were massacred, two scores of them, all the angry soldiers insisting the restaurant be evacuated due to a suspicious-looking object but they couldn't prevent the explosion from going off. He had entered all the families' houses, to help with *Kaddish*,²⁷ to hold trembling, prayerful, mournful hands.

Isaac left his apartment overlooking Paris Square²⁸ and headed for the hotel he owned in *Mea Shearim*, which some called the Mad Hotel. The *Civsa Shora*,²⁹ the Black Sheep, it was now officially called. All his personnel had left him—Shy, Steve, the day and night watchmen. Cost him three thousand *shekels*³⁰ a month to keep the place open. The couple of men he had working for him now seemed so inexperienced like children. At least one or two of them had been on drugs or in mental hospitals. One he knew had an army psychiatric discharge. Isaac felt that his patient leniency helped them. A man from a *kibbutz*³¹ wearing a blue *kibbutz* work shirt interrupted Isaac's ruminations by formally presenting him a rose as he passed or trying to, but Isaac pushed the commie *kibbutznik*³² aside. Isaac sided not with the Women in

²⁵ Israeli women's response to the first *Intifada*, or Palestinian uprising in the late 1980s. The organized protests started when some women in Tel Aviv took slides of the violence occurring in the Territories and projected them on the busy streets, but what eventually took form was a process of silent weekly rituals in which all wear black as a sign of mourning. These still occur regularly in some intersections around the country, and often provoke hostility from nationalists. Inspired by the Mothers of Argentina, the model has rippled all over the world and is used in protests of other wars in other countries, beyond support work to Palestinians.

²⁶ Refers to occupation of territories previously inhabited by Palestinians, in the '67 war.

²⁷ Prayer over wine on *Shabbat*.

²⁸ The centrally located site in posh West Jerusalem where the rituals occurred.

²⁹ *Civsa Shora* means "black sheep," in Hebrew. Here the meaning is that the hotel is a haven for those outcast from family.

³⁰ Israeli currency.

³¹ Collective agricultural settlement started by Jews claiming land for Israel earlier; now mostly privatized. Plural, *kibbutzeem*.

³² Person who lives on *kibbutz*.

Black protesting government policies but with the Women in White who came out in floppy sun hats—white, with blue brims, on the other side—and signs that read ISRAEL IS OURS: IT SAYS SO IN THE TORAH.

As Isaac pushed the *kibbutznik* away, he strode with the force of aggrandizement puffing him up in size as he walked.

Isaac smiled as he went approaching the Center,³³ remembering Steve's recounting the chaos of Sasha's first time checking in to his hotel. She had been waiting for an overseas line to call her publisher. To say the government is collapsing, wire money. She had thought she would shop. Where could she get food for the weekend, she had asked. Steve, the manager then had stopped talking, forced himself to smile and agree yes, yes, yes, with the bossy Orthodox³⁴ man from New Jersey. When Sasha had asked her innocent question, Steve had blown up, spouting smoke. He had begun showing her bus routes, map routes, and pamphlets on how to get to all the museums, though she hadn't asked. But what she had asked for, which was where to buy food, on this, he had gasped. He had even stopped complaining for one minute about how he hated to work for these stingy Israelis and if the Jews didn't have the Arabs to kill they'd kill each other off instead. He stopped his ranting and raving only long enough to shout, SHOP? DON'T YOU KNOW ABOUT SHABBAT?

"Yes, but *Shabbat* starts at 7:10, as you told me. After 7:10 I can't smoke cigarettes in the lobby. But the shops?" apparently she had repeated again to Steve.

"All the shops close at three," he declared abruptly. Steve had thought this self-evident, obviously.

Sasha had been holding a broom she had brought from upstairs. She had been sweeping. She thought about asking for a fly swatter, but focused on getting some food for the weekend, did not. "Well, tell me the nearest hotel with a restaurant I can go to then," she had asked next. But Steve's eyes had popped out.

"The Plaza. But how are you going to pay?"

"With money," Sasha had begun to wonder if something were wrong with Steve, if he were slow, or dumb, or just plain stupid. His eyes had continued blazing. He had seemed about to flip. Gray smoke had spewed out of both ears.

"They won't take money on *Shabbat*," as from another world, he explained to her.

A six-year visitor from Texas had walked in, to pay for cigarettes for which she was in debt to Steve. She too had been shocked by Sasha's ignorance. "What are you doing here?" she had asked. "She's a tourist," Steve had answered. "Yes, I was too, six years ago," the debt-payer had informed Sasha. "I'm not really a tourist, I'm a writer, I'm..." falteringly Sasha had insisted.

³³ Downtown.

³⁴ Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform are dimensions in which people choose to interpret the Jewish religion, leading from fundamentalist following of laws and dictum to reforming the religion to allow Jews to lead an assimilated life.

Soon the last-minute debt-payer had arranged a *Shabbat* dinner for Sasha, who reluctantly took her new friend up on the offer after a quick desperate forage out on the streets where she wordlessly offered to buy a sandwich from an Arab woman rummaging through the garbage. Steve had given Sasha platters of *matzah*³⁵ and cheese, and cokes and a Jaffa grapefruit³⁶ from his stash. Another tourist, a New Zealander, had offered Sasha an ear of corn. Steve had also tried to arrange her a dinner in the Old City but Sasha had thought of her mother—the Old City was reputed to be dangerous, and Sasha dutifully had promised her mother not to go there. “Don’t worry,” Steve had just as dutifully hurriedly informed her “Arabs don’t kill on *Shabbat*.” But still, it was a long walk back and forth and Sasha had complained that her feet hurt. She went back up to her room to continue sweeping, having gotten through on the phones just before G-D shut them down to another friend who had told her to relax, in Israel everything begins with a no. With the effect of the structured feeding ritual settling in, this friend had participated to, and had invited Sasha to the synagogue the next day where she could partake of *Oneg Shabbat*.³⁷ Couldn’t she manage to fast ‘til then? Her friend has reassuringly asked. Relaxed, ready to face her filthy rented room again, Sasha heard a KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK at the door. A 70-year-old French-Canadian Holocaust survivor through two teeth and a couple of sentences spurting at her, “I am your neighbor. It is my duty to tell you to put a curtain on the window.” Sasha, as stories would later be told about her, could not contain her uncontrollable laughter. “It already has a gate, and a shutter,” she had answered flippantly to him “Ok, I warned you. I’ll be a peeping Tom, then.” But reports were that this only made Sasha laugh harder. “What’s the matter, you don’t think I can?” The survivor bristled over Sasha’s uproarious, almost inebriated sounds. Then she came down to get Steve to explain to the man who had locked himself in to his three foot by six foot room that she wasn’t laughing at him, just at the whole situation. That her father had been Orthodox, religious, a *Yeshiva*³⁸ boy from Brooklyn from which her mother had saved him, and if this is what she saved him from, why then, Sasha could finally forgive her. Steve tried to explain that to the pouting old man, as only a South African living in Israel could. But the wiry old fellow couldn’t stop muttering enough to listen, about how he had regretted giving Sasha a cup of coffee when she was not sufficiently covered to go into the religious section of the old hotel to get her own.

Moments after all this, G-d descended his sheet of time, and returned all to the initial experience of creation, Sasha was walking down the streets of the religious neighborhood worrying that the precious food Steve had given her would be stolen if she left any in the common refrigerator. “Relax,” said the New Zealander who had given Sasha the corn (she was learning, in Israel, or at least in Jerusalem, that

³⁵ Flattened unleavened bread normally eaten on *Pesach* (Passover, a time around Easter, the holiday at which Jesus ate his Last Supper) to commemorate when the Jews wandered in the desert and had to keep moving, not allowing the bread to rise.

³⁶ Grapefruits grown in Jaffa, Israel. So large that there was a billboard that women protested in which the grapefruits were portrayed on a woman’s body as breasts.

³⁷ Celebration of *Shabbat*, sometimes having sexual connotations because the *Shabbas* is the time nearest to creation where Jews are invited to draw new souls to earth by performing the sexual act. Some attribute this to Sabbath, a fertility goddess, and say this tradition is a remnant of her cult. To most conservative and reform Jews, *Oneg Shabbat* simply means the ritual of tasting of feast foods after a Friday night service—wine, bread (*challah*), fruits and sweets.

³⁸ Jewish school for religious education.

“relax” was everybody’s favorite word), “haven’t you noticed they give you food here, they don’t take it?” So Sasha had gone out, into the silenced streets, with her new hostess, who expressed ambivalent attitudes. First she wanted to take Sasha to her home, to meet her daughter, and a woman from Denmark; then to a house down the street where there would be a husband with a big hat, a lot of singing, not just women alone, more complete.

“Let’s go to your house,” Sasha said. “I like women together better.”

So they did.

On the way, Sasha told her, “I grew up in a small town in the Midwest.” The hostess knowingly wrinkled her nose, threw her right shoulder up and forward and then brought it back, shrugging, opening, reaching her hands towards Sasha to indicate that she could understand. Sasha froze. Was her own reality transparent to this complete stranger? “Indiana.” Her hostess shrugged again. All around them, *davenners* in finery were glittering, rapid in their walk. Sasha came to a full stop. “In America,” when I was a kid, we didn’t have Jews in the streets like this, just white or brick houses and neighbors like the Whites, the Elliots and the Richardsons on the other sides of the picket fences. Their daughters were cheerleaders. Their grandmothers thought because I went trick or treating for UNICEF that I was a commie. There wasn’t another Jewish family in the entire neighborhood, let alone on our block.” Her hostess clucked sympathy at the spiritual desert that Sasha had grown up in and once again started to walk. “And in New England,” Sasha went on, “Where I live now, you can’t park half up on the sidewalk like this,” Sasha pointed, waving her hands), “only on the pavement between white lines, in a box.” Sympathetic, the hostess clucked again and offered Sasha a place to live, for less money than what a hotel would charge, suggesting they talk about such an arrangement after *Shabbas*, as on *Shabbas* it is not permitted to discuss business, including things like this.

The hostess was suggesting Sasha go to *yeshiva* when they went inside. Home-baked *challah*,³⁹ turkey soup, *tahini*⁴⁰ and *gelfilte*⁴¹ fish covered the European-looking white-lace-covered table when they first came in. The Danish friend, who offered Sasha a typewriter if she ever managed to get through to a publisher, informed them that the daughter of the house had gone out. “Well, never mind,” the hostess rushing to explain the *mitzvot*⁴², “no killing...”

“Who is killing Arabs here?”

“Well, maybe no stealing, this you can understand.” Her hostess hesitated, seeing a fly, but since it was *Shabbat*, not reaching for the swatter. “And every unmarried woman lights a candle—”

“To pray for a man?”

³⁹ Ritual bread for *Shabbas*, blessed at a breaking of bread after the service.

⁴⁰ Middle Eastern condiment—spread made from sesame oil.

⁴¹ European Jewish food made from ground fish.

⁴² In Hebrew, good thing. In Judaism, one is expected to do “good deeds” to help God out.

“No, just to pray. And a married woman, two candles. We usher in *Shabbat*. Then no one works, not turning on a light or anything.”

“But TV’s ok?”

“Why?”

“They said we could watch at the hotel.”

“Some one must have turned it on before sundown.”

“What’s on the news?” Her friend, largely silent until then, directed her question to Sasha. On her hostess’s behalf, she downed the fly with a swatter. “I haven’t heard the news for a week.”

“An Arab pulled a bus off the road and killed 14 people. The US will not recognize the act as terrorism. Even the PLO⁴³ condemned the aggression. Religious Jews⁴⁴ threw tear gas at the visiting Jewish athletes at the Wall because they didn’t like the circus effect.”

Sasha’s hostess stood up, grabbed a prayer book, and started singing.

Shamir’s⁴⁵ party the *Likud*⁴⁶ said no elections until after the *Intifada*,⁴⁷ no voting in East Jerusalem.⁴⁸ The most vocal of party leaders argue strongly against the creation of a Palestinian state. They want more settlements. Vice Premier Peres of Labor⁴⁹ said he would like his party out of the government. Shamir said

⁴³ Palestinian Liberation Organization. Organized into four parts, the most dominant headed by Arafat in Tunis for many years, they organized many social services for Palestinians in the neighborhoods such as day care and women’s groups. Eventually this group became first party that led the Palestinian State.

⁴⁴ Although technically referring to any Jews who follow any religious practices, the term used here refers to those practicing largely re-invented Orthodox practices in a fundamentalist way. They attempt to impose their ways on the rest of Israel out of a zealous belief that when all Jews follow each Jewish law, the Messiah returns to earth.

⁴⁵ Once *Likud* leader of the Israeli government.

⁴⁶ Right wing party in Israel.

⁴⁷ Uprising against Israeli rule that started in the Palestinian territories in 1988.

⁴⁸ Arab section of Jerusalem.

⁴⁹ Peres was formerly vice president of the Labor Party (in Hebrew *Marach*, a political party of the established left in Israel once led by Golda Meir.). This party fell in the shaky coalition with *Likud* that fell in March of 1990.

he wouldn't do what his party voted and it was negative for Peres to threaten to leave: setting bad examples for Arabs was disruptive—“

“Don't worry,” the Danish woman cooed reassuringly to Sasha, American visitor, “the government falls every Tuesday and Thursday.”

“The hostess stopped praying and showed Sasha how to wash her hands before Sasha could get over her shock at this remark. As she pretended to listen to the instructions, Sasha brooded. She missed the light in her father's eyes, which she knew would be shining if he saw her now. She started to cry. Tears welled like on the bus, in Tel Aviv, when she heard his name, which she had only heard in synagogue, at *yartzeit*.⁵⁰ In English her father's name was Jack.

In tears, Sasha got up from the table and ran through the deserted streets home, empty except for children playing, and the sound of singing. Sasha realized with a start that it had been her genes, not just her biological clock, which had clicked off when her father died, bringing her here, defenseless, into the arms of Jerusalem. There had been that light in her father's eyes—the light of God, pouring through the lamp of religious Judaism. The spark of love, the divine spark of God. She was only saved from instant religious conversion after one *Shabbat* candle lighting in *Mea Shearim* this most religious of ultra-religious neighborhoods, by the fact that teen-age sex in *American Graffiti* was on TV when she came back into the hotel. The knowledge that to go to *mikvah*⁵¹ she would have to check herself like her hostess told her twice a day after the seventh day of her period to be sure there no blood was also a stopper. Over the sounds of the neighbors' chanting and singing, children playing out in the streets, and babies crying, Sasha watched the news with the New Zealander and the night watchman in the TV room. They heard how the UN was negotiating new Arab/Israeli agreements with sanctions against Israel if Israel doesn't follow them; and how the US and Soviet Union as super-powers had to approve everything.

Sasha crawled upstairs and went to sleep, leaving the men to the false idol of television, conceding to the threats of the peeping Tom by putting a sheet over the window. Sasha tried to imagine her mother reading from a prayer book, thinking she'd call her mother rather than a publisher if she ever got a long-distance connection. But sleep was too fretful. She was asking Steve for tacks at midnight, complaining how the threatening peeping Tom made her nervous. Every time Old Daniel next door snored, the sheet fell down. Even with brass-gold tacks, the wind blew the sheet, she had complained, Steve recalled.

3.

FRIDAY, AT ONE o'clock, Isaac paced on his balcony across from the fancy high class Kings Hotel, preparing to go back to his own dismal madman's hovel, the *Civsa Shora*. He paced back into the apartment and looked out the window from Rebekah, his wife's, red and gold decorated front parlor room down at the Women in Black gathering below. At all their signs, peace, *shalom*. Outside agitators.

⁵⁰ Jewish prayers for the dead pronounced at anniversary of the person's passing.

⁵¹ Ritual bath taken monthly by Orthodox Jewish women for purposes of purity.

Foreigners. He hated them. They were against the very core and heart of the country. Isaac moved back from the window, let the thick gold drapes fall. He paced around the room. At least he came to rest under the Czechoslovakian chandelier. Really he had been glad to let Steve and the night watchman go. They had been talking negatively to tourists, American visitors, whereas dreams and history had dedicated Isaac's very life to Israel. Isaac was one of those deep-seated Persian Jews chased to Iran by Assyrians 2500 years ago. He operated by understanding, feeling and intuition as Oriental⁵² Jews do. And somehow, he could sense a gold cloud in the air, a premonition, a wavelength—this would be the day Sasha would return. Confident with this secret knowledge, Isaac left the room, shut the door, locked the apartment, and went down stairs. Out, passing the demonstrators waving their little flags for the PLO, or they might as well be. Isaac once again pushed the *kibbutznik* handing out roses who Isaac suspected (having seen evidence in the papers) lounged around swimming pools and cultivated paradisiacal gardens while everyone else had to work, taunting socialist values. For some reasons, Isaac senses, this was the day he had prayed for, yes. That must have been what his dream meant last night, of a mighty *torah* unfurling in the sky and ancestors parading across the mountains above America....

4.

MY FERTILITY DREAMS have always centered around Brooklyn, Sasha had mused in her loft in Vermont, even before I became a New-Yorker-in-Exile because of the rents. Ever since she had unwittingly joined that miserable self-hating marginal sub-strata known as the New-Yorker-in-Diaspora (discriminated against, though not having yet reached the status of census statistic so always forced to check OTHER when confronted with a box), Brooklyn as a fertility symbol in her unconscious became worse. Oh, she didn't mean fertility as in the ancient temple rites to Goddess Inanna⁵³ in Ur, the land Abraham and Sarah set out from in the Bible, carrying their chests of pearls and other precious jewels and furs and satins. She meant more precisely those twisted haunting dreams of indescribable dimensions, not even celebrations. As in her night mares of getting frozen in a fetal position driving back to Lower Manhattan when she worked at Brooklyn College and could still afford her loft; of meeting a colleague in the cafeteria. The people in the cafeteria, all around them as they spoke, shuffling, like in a concentration camp. And outside the green, floral dress and bagel and bakery shops, synagogues and *shuls*, the vendors selling bright cuts of fresh flowers. Babies in the streets in carriages.

Sasha curled up by the heater, thinking of Blueberry, big gold star around her neck, *Lod*, the send-off... That first trip, Sasha reminisced, falling asleep, and then waking up, stretching and rolling over. She recalled how surprisingly elated she had been that everything looked like Brooklyn. Outside the window she thought she saw a *Torah* scroll unroll, and she remembered, she had gone to Israel 18 months after her own father died. Maybe, meeting Isaac, if on Allenby Street they had only tried...

...her education had started on the plane. Of course she nearly didn't get on. Even as she arrived at Kennedy Airport, she wanted Blueberry Fliegel. Short, dark, rosy. They had met at a women's

⁵² Oriental refers to non-Ashkenazi, usually Jews from other Middle Eastern, non-European countries.

⁵³ In Sumerian mythology, the naked goddess who walks from heaven to the underworld, with a rod of lapis in her hand.

studies conference. Not very romantic, really. There Sasha stood. She had a green duffel bag in hand, with not many clothes but a small Celtic 24-stringed harp of lightly stained sandalwood stuffed into it. Around the edges she had stuffed clothes, notebooks, a few addresses, camera. Making a last minute phone call, she was boarding, obedient to the course of history, not knowing when she would see Blueberry, whom she was so drawn to, again...on the plane she had planned to write her graduate school application. This making money writing for a living wasn't working. Which is why she had been tempted to follow Blueberry to San Francisco where she worked in a communications department that funded her to go to Palestine/Israel to make a video exposé. Maybe there was more hope in graduate school. But Sasha felt this mystical irrational call and dutifully went, and as she was remembering, her education had started on the plane. How did the scene go? Sasha found the entries from her notebooks. The journal she had kept read like a novel. She had tried to read the entries, and had fallen asleep again, been woken by the sound of the hippies opening the Daily Bread Café below her, and left, all the way in the cold, driving herself to buses, busing to airports. As if obsessed, she found herself in a fugue state, following a flag, no a *torah* unfurl. Her ancestors drew her like a magnet down to New York and out of America...

5.

IN THE AIR her graduate school application proposal had been to study the reification of high culture through literary analysis of airplane scenes by contemporary American poets and novelists. At home others had thought this dry, sardonic, and hence wonderful, slotted for presentation at the MLA.⁵⁴ Ginsberg, yes, and Erica Jong—must include both of them, her co-conspirators had plotted to subvert the cannon in their shared hotel room. But here, on the plane, with her back to America, headed towards Tel Aviv, the Statue of Liberty receding into torrid orange, the woman on her right had been reading a book in Hebrew written by a Jewish survivor who visited a Polish ghetto. The woman thought the Palestinians should go back to the Arab countries.

The man on her left hadn't thought the situation so simple. He worked in intelligence for the US Navy. This month he was going to Haifa to teach Israelis how to undo mines; last month he had gone to Egypt to teach Arabs how to plant mines. Why do you work for both sides, Sasha had asked. I work for one side, he had answered, our government.

"Needless to say, his declaration startled me," Sasha read in her notebooks as she read over her journals on the return plane. And over his drink the stranger next had asked why she was going to Israel, the obvious reciprocal question.

Finally Sasha had muttered something about this Jewish Fatherland bit, and that she was going to Israel to work on getting pregnant hopefully in the fields by a *kibbutznik* mango picker. She after all was 36; it was now or never; and she just couldn't get into this alternative semination bit. How could she tell a child he came from a sperm bank? Unflinchingly, the suddenly intimate debonair stranger recommended she try a sailor. Their flesh was government-inspected, he calmly assured her.

⁵⁴ Modern Language Association, the annual conference of which is a meat market for those seeking employment in the field of English in colleges and universities.

"A sperm could be considered like a match that you put to a candle. A match lights, you throw it off," this trip, Sasha writes. Yet she had imagined telling a hypothetical child, "you have no dad, you have no pictures to take into kindergarten on father's day. You can't draw your father's side of a family tree, when they ask you in second grade, because you come from a bank." She could never quite picture herself having such conversations very successfully. This way, the way she had planned, she had thought she could say, "your father is in Israel, and when we can afford to, we will go visit him." The father would have no opportunity to come after her, or to colonize her. She could get on her blue *kibbutz*nik shorts, roll up her workshirt sleeves, get busy, as soon as she got there---

6.

ISAAC WASN'T SO very happy with his wife Rebekah, but she was a good wife. She was beautiful and virginal when she originally came to marry Isaac, and now at least she kept him and the children well fed. And their high-classed exquisite apartment neat, with real tablecloths, gold sheets on the beds, chandeliers from Eastern Europe even though they were Oriental and not *Ashkenazi*, and thick draperies. Rebekah was very *hamisch*,⁵⁵ always in the home, welcoming everybody, baking cakes for the children. Always there, just for him, except when bustling round for children and neighbors. She too was Oriental, and wore too much make-up. Rebekah was from Russia, Tibilisi,⁵⁶ where women never drove and you never saw a single blond lady. Isaac's mother, who had come to Palestine in 1920 because she had a dream, would only let Isaac marry an Oriental. And Isaac was the apple of his mother's eye, the principal inheritor of al her seven children. Isaac missed her.

When his mother was alive, Isaac had to do everything she said, or she would never have left him the property. When she screamed, the house shook. Which wasn't good for business, at least not this one, where quite people from polite countries stayed occasionally, expecting toilet paper, soap and other such cotidinuuous niceties to be put at their individual disposal regularly. Isaac tried to do as his mother bid him. There was the time he tried to fire Steve, although his mother told him not to do so. Steve would always try to quit. OK, said Isaac one day, so quit, but where will you go? His mother, holding her flaming red *menorah* in one had while Rachel, would-be mother of Israel, solemnly straightened the gold pillow behind her, had warned Isaac, he must never let Steve go. Rachel nodded, agreeing in silence as she settled Mama back into her voluminous silken bed. This was an edict from Mama that Rachel felt it her duty to support, if Isaac ever swerved off course. Her lips pursed as she walked, picking up oranges and tomatoes and eggplants and cucumbers and chickpeas and other essentials at the *shuk*.⁵⁷

Ah, Isaac thought as he crossed *Haneyi-em*, the Street of the Prophets, heading towards *Hamisch* Bakery, towards his ramshackle cheap hotel, the *Civsa Shora*, cruising. He noticed the many men's and women's hats of ultimate variety for sale, and the bolts of satin-embossed cloth in the windows. What a life. If I could do as I wanted, Isaac mused, I would go into fashion, or theater, acting—something to do with

⁵⁵ Yiddish, meaning of and in the home. Domestic grace.

⁵⁶ Georgian city in Russia.

⁵⁷ Market place of small self-employed vendors setting up stalls.

costume. Eyeing scarves of blue and lavender paisley, Isaac zipped up his tacky gray nylon jacket and swished past the dress shop he used to run, before the rabbis fleeing *pogroms*⁵⁸ in Europe had smashed the windows of his store and forced him to go out of business. Isaac seemed like the kind of man who could hardly handle a handshake, to some. But he owned businesses, houses, and stores all over Jerusalem, making a business out of cheating everyone. There were the permanent boarders at *Civsa Shora*, for example, penned in, disgruntled with newcomers as well as with each other. Isaac was disheartened, bored with his life, dealing with petty details of Jewish survival like trying to keep Old Daniel from singing constantly and scaring everyone off. Sometimes Isaac was so depressed, especially when tourist business dropped, chased off by *meshugenahs*⁵⁹ like this, that he told the complaining guests in his cheap hotel that the heat worked, when it didn't. He couldn't be bothered to explain the ancient building his family had bought had no central heating.

Isaac wondered as he walked if he would be honest with Sasha when she came back, or if he would allow her to continue her obvious fantasies about him. He wondered if he would tell her everything that he just married for his mother because the gay life is always a question. He, too, had intense feelings towards Sasha, but he had been gay so long he wouldn't know what to do with a woman's body. A few times, yes, he had been able to accomplish what was necessary routinely for the sake of children, but he was only really happy with his lover Nayil. Sasha must know gays, Isaac mused. This he speculated because he heard her talking in the lobby about AIDS, when the woman from down the street had asked, how was AIDS in America. The woman had been bringing Sasha a Danish typewriter. Sasha had answered that there were floats of people dying, at gay pride marches, being pulled through the New York City Lower Manhattan streets. Gay pride marches. What a remarkable thing. Hadn't hit Jerusalem yet, not even Tel Aviv, Isaac marveled to himself. He kept walking.

⁵⁸ Refers to ordered raids of Jewish areas when mounted police and soldiers would enter and destroy Jewish neighborhoods in an attempt to get the Jews to leave.

⁵⁹ Crazy, mixed up, in Yiddish.