VINTAGE

SLEEPING ON A WIRE

DAVID GROSSMAN

Contents

Cover
About the Book
About the Author
Also by David Grossman
Title Page
Prologue

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17

The End of the Beginning
Acknowledgments
Copyright

About the Book

Israel: Jewish state and national homeland to Jews the world over. But a fifth of its population is Arab, a people who feel themselves to be an inseparable part of the Arab nation, most of which is still technically at war with the State of Israel.

In the summer of 1991 David Grossman set out on a journey into the world of Arab citizens of his country. *Sleeping on a Wire* is an account of what he found. It is about men and women fighting to find a voice, to pick out the pulse of their own identity in a land that doesn’t seem to be theirs. He has not written about open conflict. Rather it is a story of ferment beneath the surface, and an intensifying bitterness which can only exacerbate the troubles of the Middle East.

About the Author

David Grossman was born in Jerusalem. He is the author of numerous works of fiction, nonfiction and children’s literature. His work has appeared in *The New Yorker* and has been translated into twenty-five languages around the world. He is the recipient of many prizes, including the French Chevalier de l’Ordre des Artes et des Lettres, the Buxtehuder Bulle in Germany, Rome’s Premio per la Pace e l’Azione Umitaria, the Premio Ischia International Award for Journalism, Israel’s Emet Prize, and the Albatross Prize given by the Günter Grass Foundation.

Also by David Grossman

Fiction

In Another Life

Someone to Run With

Be My Knife

The Zigzag Kid

The Book of Intimate Grammar

See Under: Love

The Smile of the Lamb

To The End of the Land

Lion's Honey: The Myth of Samson

Non-Fiction

Writing in the Dark: Essays on Literature and Politics

Death as a Way of Life: Israel Ten Years After Oslo

DAVID GROSSMAN

Sleeping on a Wire

Conversations with Palestinians in Israel

TRANSLATED FROM THE HEBREW BY
Haim Watzman

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

“The Jews don’t know enough about us. They don’t even want to know that there’s another nation here. Who really cares what I feel? Who will want to read your book about us? But it’s our fault, too, for not even trying to let you know who we are. We didn’t bother. Maybe because we have a feeling that the authorities know everything about us anyway. They’re the bosses, you know, the security agents, the state, the Ministry of Education, and it’s as if they’ve already settled everything for us in advance. They’ve already planned out our future, and all that’s left for us is to toe the line. And we really toe it. That’s how we’ve demeaned and wronged ourselves.

“But the Jews have to know what we’re really thinking. We’ve already framed our ambitions, and they contain nothing that can harm the Jews. They can be stated openly and without theatrics: We’re not in love with the Jews, not happy, not ‘How wonderful, they’re here’; but they’re here, and we’ll have to live with that. And if we aren’t honest with ourselves, we’re done for. If we make a big show of it and try to act as if everything’s fine, we’ll have internalized all of Western politics, and our identity will be lost completely.”

—Mohammed Daroushe, twenty-eight, Iksal

PROLOGUE

One hot night in July 1991, I visited a summer camp in the Lavie Forest. Israeli boys and girls, Jews and Arabs, were standing and debating the state's treatment of its Arab citizens, the Arabs' disregard of Israel's complex predicament, the way the army fights the intifadah. With righteous wrath and youthful charm they hammered home their arguments, worn from overuse. As I watched them, I could not tell by sight who was Jewish and who was Arab. Their features are similar, their clothes and hair styled by the dictates of the same fashions; even their body language is the same, as is the Hebrew they speak. Only the accent is different. I recalled that I had already participated in such an event—when I was their age, more or less, in a Jewish-Arab summer camp in Acre. Then, more than twenty years ago, we might have been distinguished from each other by our dress, language, and degree of contentiousness during a debate, but what has not changed since then is the sharpness of mutual emotion, the powerful need to have this particular individual understand you and confirm your feelings—and the awkwardness and illusion, because at times he is close by, that individual, and then suddenly he is far away, and how can someone so close to me be so wrong about me; how can someone so distant know me so well?

The circle of disputants opened abruptly. A boy of perhaps fourteen, who stood on the outside, was thrust toward me, and a trail of whispers rose and swooped after him. “He’s the one who ran away,” someone said in an undertone, and the debate instantly died.

“We sat with him all day, three Jews, three Arabs,” a boy named Itai explained. “We talked with him, made him think.”

The boy, M., listened to what was being said about him. He was a somewhat clumsy, pale type, his movements guarded, his gaze older than his age.

“It hurt me that M. ran away,” said Sana,[1] from Acre. “It was important to me that he stay here, that we change preconceptions together. Because there were two Jewish girls here, right-wing, and they decided to go home …”

Murmurs of agreement, Jewish and Arab, and a slight, common sense of pride. I asked M. why he had come to the camp.

“To have a good time. For a vacation,” he responded, caught up in himself but apparently not at all put off by the interest he was attracting. “I read that it was a camp for Jews and Arabs, but I didn’t realize it was Jews and Arabs together so much. And I—before that, what can I say, being with Arabs really didn’t grab me.” While he spoke the others were silent, drawn by the confession. “So I came, and right away I saw that it’s *really* together. More than I thought. Them and us together all the time. Even at night. And I started feeling uneasy.”

An Arab boy named Basel asked if he had known Arabs before.

“Yes. I was with Arabs once, but not like this. I was with my grandfather’s laborers. But with them it was different, and here it became clear to me—I didn’t especially like the idea of sleeping together, me and them, in the same tent.”

“It didn’t bother me to sleep together with Jews,” Basel objected.

"I …" M. hesitated. "At night I couldn't take it anymore … I went behind the tents, until I found a hole in the fence, and I left."

I thought of the way through the forest to the camp—a steep, narrow road between pine trees, the caves, the jagged rocks.

"We warned him not to leave," Itai said. "The forest is full of old wells you could fall into at night."

"It was after nine o'clock," M. continued in a low voice, in awe of himself, as if only as he spoke did he comprehend what had actually happened. "It was pitch black. No one saw me leave. I went through the fence, hunched over, so they wouldn't see, into the forest."

The young people were transfixed by his white face. The strange story stripped them of their youthful cockiness, and for a moment they looked like children. Beyond the small, tight circle, the camp seemed like a far-off memory. Light bulbs weakly illuminated the cots, adolescents walked down the path from the shower; in one of the tents a boy preened in front of a girl, and on the bed right next to them another girl lay on her belly, buried in a book.

"But what exactly were you scared of?" Sana whispered, a lock of hair in her mouth.

"I was scared, you think I know why? That they might rob me. That they'd do something to me … I felt really uneasy about it," he said, shrugging his shoulders apologetically. "I mean, about the tent, being the only Jew, and everyone around me an Arab. That we have to be together, for real."

"And did you know where you were going?" asked a voice out of the darkness.

"More or less … not exactly. I walked to where I thought there'd be a main road, and I thought I'd wait until morning and find a bus to go home to Jerusalem."

"Did you know the way?"

"I knew I had to go down. I got so mixed up."

“Did you find the road?”

“The police found me by the road.”

“They found him in a total daze, crying,” whispered a girl behind me.

“How long did you wander like that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Weren’t you scared in the forest?”

“Sure I was scared,” M. said, “but I was more scared in the tent.”

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[1] Out of consideration for the reader who does not know Arabic, names and terms from that language are not transliterated “scientifically.”

CHAPTER 1

IT WAS MORNING in the *midafeh*—the room where guests are received—in the house of Hassan Ali Masalha in Kafr Kara. Passions flared among the men seated on mats; the elder Hassan Masalha was debating with his son. The former was saying, “The Palestinians have only lost and will continue to lose from the intifadah.” His son jumped up, mortified at his father’s words: “What is economic loss? That’s a loss? In the territories they have culture now! *There* they have principles! *There* they have no crime! *There* there are no drugs!” The old man, reclining comfortably on a thin mattress, an embroidered pillow under his forearm, dismissed his son’s words with a single wave of his hand. Another elder, Fahmi Fanaka, leaned over to me and whispered, “The Palestinians will have a state, but for us, the train has already passed us by.” As I wrote this down, the windows in the large, unfurnished room suddenly shook from a sonic boom. An unfamiliar expression passed over the faces of all those present, skipping like a spark from eye to eye. “It’s only an airplane,” I said to the man next to me, reassuring him, as we do each other in Jerusalem when there is a loud explosion. “I know,” the man replied quietly. “It’s probably going to Lebanon.” I wanted to ask him another question, but the commotion resumed, the debate between the old father and his angry son, and I forgot the incident.

In Beit Hanina, to the north of Jerusalem, in a small apartment full of burgeoning plants, Adel Mana—who was born in the Galilee village of Majd el-Krum—told me the story of his childhood, and then I remembered.

A long, harsh story. The village resisted the Israeli Army in 1948, and after it was overcome, the army gathered all its inhabitants in the central square. According to Adel Mana, the soldiers shot four of those who had participated in the fighting. Afterward they put several hundred of the villagers on buses and took them to Wadi Ara, where they let them off at some unknown point in the middle of the night and said, Eastward, and whoever returns gets shot. Mana himself was then a one-year-old baby. He wandered with his parents to Nablus, to Jordan, to Syria, and to Lebanon. His first memories are from there, how other members of the family joined them in the refugee camp, how his father would steal into Israel to get money from his grandmother and sisters who had remained in Majd el-Krum, or sometimes to help them press the olives or harvest wheat in the summer.

"At the beginning of '51 we 'made *aliya*,'" he related. "We did what you call 'illegal immigration.' We came in a boat from Sidon to Acre with a few other families from the village. My uncle, Father's brother, was uncertain whether to join us. Of course, he wanted to return to the village, but he was afraid of what they would do to him here. He was also afraid because many were killed when they tried to cross the border. When we set off, he stayed there, in Ein el-Hilweh."

"And then what happened?"

"He married, and he has a family there. We twice submitted requests to the army to allow him to visit us. They were approved and he came. The last time was in '82. After that they didn't allow it anymore. Now we are almost unable to maintain contact with him. If we can, we send him letters. That's all. If we hear that the air force bombed

Lebanon, obviously the first thing we think is, What about him, what about his children?"

It was then, some weeks later, that I caught the glances of the men in the *midafeh*.

In Nazareth I spoke to Lutfi Mashour, editor of the weekly newspaper *As-Sinara*: "My wife is from Bethlehem. She is the spoils I brought home from the Six-Day War, so you see that something good also came out of the occupation. My daughters have a grandfather there, my wife's father. Once the grandfather went to the civil administration to request that they renew his driver's license. He is eighty-five, but his health is excellent and he wants to continue to drive. He came to the administration's headquarters and saw Arabs kneeling down. Not on two knees, only on one. A soldier told him, Kneel like them. Grandfather said, 'I'm already eighty-five years old, and you can shoot me, but I won't kneel down.' The soldier let him be, but said, 'Because of that you'll go to everyone and collect their identity cards.' There were about three hundred people there. Grandfather, eighty-five years old, had to be insulted like that, to have a young soldier use him as an errand boy, and to take the cards from his kneeling brothers. He told the soldier, 'You have power and I'll do it, but why are you forcing them to kneel?' The soldier said, 'How else could I keep an eye on them all?' 'Bring an empty barrel and stand on it.' 'I should go to all that effort for them?' The soldier laughed.

"This is what my daughters have to hear. These are girls who were born in the State of Israel, and every day they hear a new story from Grandfather, from their uncles, and they're fed up. I should tell you that we have decided to send them overseas to study, because if they stay here, I don't know what will happen to them. They've been through the seven circles of hell since they were small, through insults and curses, through substandard schools, through searches and roadblocks at the airport, and now these stories about their grandfather. I’m telling you that if they stayed here a little longer, we would lose control of them. Had I been in their position, I would have lost control long ago, and I don’t know what will happen to them in the future. Don’t you know, there’s a new generation here. A generation that did not experience our fears, that isn’t intimidated by you.”

At such moments, almost incidentally, a full, three-dimensional picture took shape as if it were crystallizing in a glass. I really should have recognized it. After all, like everyone else I knew that the Arabs who live in Israel have extensive links with the Palestinians in the territories and in the Arab countries. I knew the historical background, that about 160,000 Arabs remained here after the 1948 war and almost 600,000 of their relatives fled or were expelled. I remembered well the longings of the refugees in the camps for the cities and villages from which they were uprooted, and for their relatives there. But only at the sound of those slight, involuntary sighs, or at the sight of the faces of the men around me draining of blood when an airplane passed overhead, could I for the first time feel it within myself, without putting up any defenses. Those moments were repeated again and again—like the story of the cousin who disappeared in Nablus, arrested by the army for interrogation; for an entire week his whereabouts were unknown. An entire family, in Israel and in Nablus, went mad with worry. And the aunt, in whose house the search was conducted, from whom the entire family’s picture albums, all those precious moments, were confiscated. And how you almost die before you find out exactly what names are behind the laconic news on the radio of dead and wounded in “disturbances” in Jenin or in Ramallah, or what goes through your head when the newscaster reports that “all our planes have returned safely.”

"My Palestinian brother there," said Hassan Ali Masalah from Kafr Kara, the old man, paunchy and smiling, "is not against my country; he is only against your regime there. He wants to live. They shouldn't kill my brother. They should respect him, and I will respect them. Blood is not water." "How is it that you Jews don't understand such a thing," a young leader of the intifadah in Barta'a said to me. "You, because of blood ties, are willing to fly to Africa and bring 15,000 Ethiopians in a single day, simply because two thousand years ago they were your relatives. And if they kill a Jew in Brooklyn or in Belgium, all of you immediately shout and cry."

When the realization finally penetrates, through all the functional layers of protection, how much the Palestinians in Israel and in the territories are in many ways a single living body, a single organic tissue, one wonders at the powers of forbearance needed by the Arabs in Israel in order to continue to exercise self-restraint. And one wonders, Do they consider what this restraint implies for themselves, and the significance of their collaboration in Israel's daily routine? How do they excuse the fact that their taxes finance that plane, and the bombs hanging from it, and the soldier in Bethlehem who laughs at Grandfather: "*I* should go to all that effort for them?"

"No, I'm not at all comfortable with the response of Israeli Arabs to the intifadah," said Azmi Bishara, born in Nazareth, chairman of the Philosophy Department at Bir Zeit University in the West Bank. "It is not the same struggle. Certainly not the same price. It's not even a struggle parallel to the struggle in the territories. Jenin is under curfew, starving, and Nazareth, twenty minutes away, is living normally. But what? We have *solidarity* with them.

"It makes me feel horrible. It makes me feel sick. Because I think that somewhere between Palestinian nationalism and the pitiful opportunism of the Arab mayors there is a path that can guide us as citizens in the State of Israel. Citizens who allow ourselves a little more ‘solidarity’ with the inhabitants of the territories. So I start behaving a little more like the Israeli left—what’s wrong with that? So I won’t be ashamed to march 50,000 Arabs through Tel Aviv. Just like Martin Luther King, Jr., wasn’t ashamed of 50,000 blacks in Washington. I have no problem with them calling me a nationalist. I’m not a nationalist. These slogans are not nationalism. They are in every respect the slogans of good citizens. If the Tempo soft-drink factory lays off all its Arab workers, I will call on the Arab population of Israel to boycott it completely! If they don’t want me, why should I drink their Maccabee beer?”

“You mean an internal Arab boycott?”

“Not a boycott as Arabs! Not a boycott as Palestinians! As Israelis! And as an Israeli I won’t be ashamed to have a black crowd march through Tel Aviv and upset the city. The inhabitants of the territories can’t do it, but we can. I should have and could have organized marches at the beginning of the intifadah. There was enough anger then for a step like that. But our leadership died of fear. Our leadership is afraid that all those nice Jews who are responsible for the ‘sector’ [he spits that word out the same way he did “solidarity”] will smile at us and say in a nice voice, ‘You want to be like they are in the territories? Go on, do something, and then we will treat you just like we treat them. And remember not to take anything for granted in our attitude toward you, Israeli Arabs. When it comes down to it, you are tolerated guests here. And guests can be shown the door.’”

He is thirty-five years old, black-haired, with a dark face and a thick mustache. At age sixteen he founded the National Committee of Arab High School Students in Israel, the first nationwide organization of Arab youth. In the mornings, instead of going to school, the young Bishara grabbed his satchel and set out on “working tours” of the villages in Wadi Ara and the southern Triangle, organizing high-school students to fight for equality in education. “We closed down the schools a few times, a very militant story. We could decide just like that to shut down a school, no problem. Remember that it wasn’t an easy time—in ’74 we went around with *kaffiyehs*. That was when Arafat addressed the United Nations and the Egyptian Army crossed the Suez Canal. We had a lot of Palestinian sensibility.

“Today? Today there’s a difference between us and the Palestinians in the territories. Our experience is different from theirs. The sensibility is different, too. They can conduct a violent struggle against you. We can’t anymore. Not because of the Shin Bet [the internal security service], but because we ourselves are no longer able to see this as a possibility. It is already contrary to the temperament of our population, which has lived with you for decades and is already part of the economy and the way of life and a million other things. The Arabs here are an integral part of your story, even if you haven’t fathomed this yet. When the intifadah began, we had to make a quick and clear decision: are we part of it or not part of it? Period. And we discovered that our aspirations branched off at this point from the aspirations of the Palestinians in the territories.

“But in one thing there is no distinction: as far as you’re concerned, both we and they are strangers here. Unwanted here. Rejected. And for this reason I say that the old way that Israeli Arabs think about Israel is bankrupt. It can’t be allowed to go on. Precisely because of the alienation that you impose on me, precisely because I am frightened, precisely because in your opinion nothing can be taken for granted in your attitude toward us, so I’m also allowed not to have my attitude toward you taken for granted.

“When Martin Luther King put together his movement for equal rights in America in the sixties, he called for total equality, period. Equality that would go as far as positive discrimination in favor of the blacks, in order to correct the injustice of decades. Together with that he had no problem shouting, ‘I am proud to be an American,’ in other words, as a black man, the country was his, too. The flag was also his. The blacks emphasized that they were no less American than others. Now I ask myself if the American Indians could do such a thing. Can an Indian shout with all his heart, ‘I am proud to be an American’?”

“And you, in this metaphor, are the Indian?”

“I think so. From that point of view I am like the Palestinian in the territories. Neither of us is wanted here. Both of us are ignored. And on top of that I’m caught in the perfect paradox—I have to be a loyal citizen of a country that declares itself not to be my country but rather the country of the Jewish people.”

Vehement in expression, emotional, a dissenter from birth, his movements untempered, Bishara looks as if a struggle is always going on within him. He lives in Nazareth, in Jerusalem, in Bir Zeit. He likes big cities and divided people. “The most dangerous people are healthy people at one with themselves, people without contradictions—I’m wary of them. I also liked Berlin when it was divided. Now I can’t set foot in it. It disappointed me. It became normal.”

“And do you feel a link to the land here, to the country?” I asked. “A link to nature? To the view? Is there any place in the country that you especially like?”

He let out a long laugh, a laugh to himself. “You want me to feel something for Karmiel? For Afula? Nothing is as gray as those places. However you look at them. Or Migdal Ha-emek. Would I take a tour of Migdal Ha-emek? You’ll find that resistance stronger in me than in Israeli Arabs who have already assimilated the situation and their experience, who have married here, who have children, who go for weekends at the beach. I don’t go for weekends at the beach. I don’t recognize the beaches in this country. I hate the Israeli beach bum. He reeks of insolence and violence and swagger, and I can't stand it. I feel very foreign among Israelis. It's not just that I have white spots on the map where the Jewish settlements are; I've also got a great emptiness of nature. They always talk about the Palestinians' links with nature and the land. I have no link with nature, not to woods, not to mountains; I don't know the names of the plants and trees as even my Israeli friends do. In Arabic poetry in Israel the names of all the plants appear, the *za'atar* and the *rihan*, but I don't know them, can't tell them apart, and I don't care about them. For me nature is, somehow, the Jewish National Fund. All the forests and flora are the JNF. It's all artificial and counterfeit. Can you see me wandering the mountains, hiking for the fun of it, and suddenly the Green Patrol [charged with guarding state lands] comes and asks me what I'm doing here?"

When I met Bishara for the first time, years ago, there was something forbidding in his appearance. I force myself to write this because it is part of the subject as a whole. There's something forbiddingly Arab, I thought—his face is dark, his mustache thick—in the belligerence I attributed to him, all this formed part of the rough outline of the archetypical foreign and frightening Arab. Since then, every time our paths meet, I reflect on that. There is a special joy—joy in the victory of the weak, in the unraveling of any stereotype.

I asked how, in his opinion, Palestinians in the territories relate to the dilemma of the Arabs who live in Israel.

"They look down on us. Yes, yes. Before the intifadah it was the opposite—there was admiration. For a while even phony admiration. Admiration that was meant to inflate the Israeli-Arab experience. Yet I am not proud of anything. What do I have to be so proud of? Of the fact that the Arabs in Israel have not produced anything of significance? No culture, no elite, nothing. Their intellectual life is shocking.

What is there for them to be proud of? Of their pursuit of lucrative professions, of money and more money? Of the lack of any intellectual dimension? There is not a single intellectual I can be proud of. Not a philosopher, not a single writer I'm proud of. They're all dwarfs. Look at Emile Habibi, who makes an ideology out of the 'Israeli-Arab experience,' and every time he talks he declares, 'We've stayed here for forty-three years!' What do you mean you've stayed? What's the big deal? But for him staying is a *conspiracy*. Do you understand? [He lowers his voice and whispers.] Some people got together and held meetings and consultations, and after a month of uncertainty they decided to remain in the State of Israel, to keep the flame burning … After all, our whole story, of the Arabs in Israel, is no more than the struggle to survive. That's not such a heroic struggle. It was largely a story of cringing, lots of toadying and opportunism, and imitation of the Israelis. And when the Arabs here finally started feeling a little more sure of themselves, they had already turned into Israelis. What Israeli-Arab symbols are there that a man like me can identify with? Nothing. Even when you think that there's an authentic phenomenon like the Islamic Movement, it turns out to be counterfeit. I debated their leader, Sheikh Abdallah Nimr Darwish, in Haifa. An open debate before an audience. I was astounded at how little he understands Islam. Superficial. He doesn't know it. For him, Islam is only a political tool.

"So where is all the talk about our pride, about our heroism? Listen to a heroic story: Once there was a protest rally in the Communists' Friendship House in Nazareth, and the police surrounded the building. The next day the headline in the Communist newspaper was THE SECOND SIEGE OF BEIRUT! Do you understand? They surrounded the Friendship House in Nazareth! When it comes down to it, the Arabs of Israel, with the exception of the six who fell on

Land Day[1] in 1976, didn't pay much. In other words, it's impossible, it's disgraceful to compare them to the Arabs in the territories. You should see it there; when someone gives a speech, he is the spokesman for an entire history. There are symbols, there's rhetoric, pathos, spark. On our side you hear half a sentence and feel that where we are everything is empty. Our history is cut off."

When he came to our meeting, Bishara was upset. A short while before he had been with his sister in a restaurant in East Jerusalem. His sister is a doctor and lives in Beit Jalla, near Bethlehem. Her Citroën has the blue license plates that show it is from the territories. But there was a little sticker with the word DOCTOR in Hebrew on the windshield. That was enough to get the car torched. "And imagine," he snorted, "there I was helping the guys from the Border Guard put out the fire; it was very embarrassing!"

He was nevertheless able to laugh at the circumstances there, and at himself. So I did not restrain myself from saying to him, "Here they gave you the spark you were looking for." Afterward I asked him whether he was angry at the arsonists.

"On the contrary," he said immediately, "I was pleased that they are so good at spotting Israeli cars."

I already knew, after about a month of visits and conversations, that I would almost always get an unexpected response. That the status of the Arab who lives in Israel is so tangled and twisted that I had to stop trying to anticipate, and only listen, to open myself to the complexity, to try to make room for it. Make room for them within us. How does one do that? It is precisely the thing that we, the majority, forbid them with such deft determination.

And here, something like a nervous security guard began running around inside me, reorganizing the broken ranks. It seems to me that the words “make room for them” are what set him off. He is part of me, I’ve encountered him several times in the past month. Right now he demands to know exactly what I meant—just how much room to make for them? And at whose expense? And is it necessary to open the discussion just now, while the peace talks are in progress? And when the country is trying, with its remaining strength, to absorb a huge wave of immigration? He speaks, and something unpleasant is slowly revealed to me: that when, for example, Azmi Bishara says he wants to march a black crowd through Tel Aviv, something in me recoils. Contorts. And suddenly I am the one facing the test. How real and sincere is my desire for “coexistence” with the Palestinians in Israel? Do I stand wholeheartedly behind the words “make room for them among us”? Do I actually understand the meaning of Jewish-Arab coexistence? And what does it demand of me, as a Jew in Israel? How much room am I really willing to make for “them” in the Jewish state? Have I ever imagined, down to the smallest living detail, a truly democratic, pluralistic, and egalitarian way of life in Israel? These questions race at me, and caught me unprepared—an abstract, perhaps simplistic picture of life with the Arabs was impressed on me from the start, and because of it, apparently, I set out on this journey. I certainly wanted to persuade others it was an imperative, and here, the outer layer of these abstract declarations was quickly torn away, and from within its contents burst forth—demanding, threatening, enticing, shaking the defenses—

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[1] An annual day of protest by Palestinian Israelis against Israeli government confiscation of Arab land.

CHAPTER 2

UNFOLDING BELOW THE balcony of Tagrid and Abed Yunes's attractive house in the village of Arara are olive groves and fields of wheat. Beyond them is the Wadi Ara road—or, officially, in Hebrew, the Nahal Iron road—and after it low hills, golden in the afternoon sunlight. A burgeoning grapevine stretches over the trellis at the threshold, and inside the house Majd and Sumu—"splendor" and "glory," he two years old, she one—waddle about in their Pampers, whooping at me Hebrew words they have learned—*b'seder, kadima* ("okay," "get going")—and climbing all over Mommy Tagrid. Impossible to have a conversation this way—who will take the children to Grandma? Tagrid will.

"I met Tagrid at her house." Abed recounts their history as we relax on the balcony, looking out over the fields. "I had seen her once before, and I heard good things about her, but introductions—only at her parents' house. I came with a friend who mediated. We went and sat with her father. Her mother, at most, brought refreshments. It was fine. It's a liberal, open family. My family—let's say there's a difference.

"Two days later she went overseas with a delegation, and every week I would visit them, ask what was new with Tagrid, if she had written, if she had called, had expressed any interest.

“When she finally came back, I drove to the airport to greet her. She didn’t understand what I was doing there. I thought she would drive back with me, in my car, to the village, but she sent her suitcases with me instead.

“The next morning I let her sleep until eleven and then I called her: How are you, Tagrid? How did you sleep? How was it over there? May I come visit you?

“I came over and we sat alone together. What does alone mean? Every two minutes someone came to take something, to arrange something, and all the doors were open.

“So we began talking. She made inquiries about me in the village, asked if I would permit her to continue her studies. She wanted me to be an electrical engineer, but I didn’t want to—being a technician was enough for me. But I promised her she wouldn’t have to stop her studies. Even then I saw that her independence was very, very important to her.”

“What have you been saying about me?” Tagrid returns, pours juice, brings fruit. Her laughter rings through the house. Her face is sharply outlined and illuminated by a whole range of expressions. Energetic and impetuous. Abed, in contrast, is very careful—part of the hidden tug-of-war of marriage—to keep to a single expression, sober and deliberate. But it is hard to be that way faced with her charm and her bustle, so there is always the shadow of a smile on his lips.

“She didn’t stop talking to me about her independence and her freedom, and I promised. Of course.” He nods to her, and she to him. “And when I married her, it was a little hard for me. You know, from the very beginning she wanted to do things that I’d never even thought of—‘Come on, Abed, let’s have breakfast together.’ Breakfast together?! And she would say, ‘Just stand beside me, Abed, be with me.’ And I, when I was still living at home, I would get up in the morning and my mother would have prepared everything. I would come home in the middle of the night with friends, at one in the morning, and wake up Mom: We're hungry, and she would get up and cook a meal for everyone."

"Those days are gone." Tagrid laughs. "I explained to Abed what marriage meant for me; it's for emotional support, so that you have a partner like yourself, right?"

"Okay, little by little I began to understand her. Today it's enough for me to stand beside her, and that's help for her. I stand. Talk with her while she cooks. I've gotten used to it," he says heavily, as if reciting to himself, "because we're both working people. We're both teachers. Fairness tells me that this is my wife, and it won't help me if I'm rude and I say that I don't want to help. She's tired, too. I don't know how to cook, but I can help. Straighten things up a little."

I ask, "Change the kids' diapers?"

"No. Not that."

"Why not, really? They're disposable, after all. It's easy."

"No, um, it's not for me. What am I … No. Stop it! We already had an argument about that!"

"I really don't like him to change diapers," she says.

And he: "Bathing them, too. I can't do it alone. Together—yes. Stand with her—yes."

"And feeding a child? What about that, Abed?" She's provoking him.

"Not that. Only a mother knows how to do that. I lose patience with the kids after a few minutes."

She: "That's an easy out, Abed."

He: "Even when a woman asks you to help her, she doesn't want you to do everything. What's a man who does everything? A man who cooks?"

And she, patiently: "I'm not asking you to change Sumu's diaper. But help me wash the dishes? Why not? That I'm willing to have you do."

“Thanks very much.” He brings the exchange to an end and smiles. The crease between his eyes deepens for a minute and goes into shadow.

“In my parents’ generation,” Tagrid relates, scurrying to the kitchen, pouring coffee, bringing cookies, “the division of male and female roles was not open to question. My mother did not even ask for help. The circumstances dictated she put everything she had into the home. Father worked hard. When he came home, he’d sit down in front of the television, and when he wanted the channel switched he’d tell us to do it. We liked to help him. Mother had no social life. Her relationships were only within the family. Outside the family was forbidden. And no hobbies. No aspirations. No self-fulfillment, other than raising children.”

“And what is her attitude toward your way of life?”

“Ever since I’ve been on my own, Mother has had less and less to say to me. Her advice isn’t relevant for me. It’s for a different type of woman, a more traditional woman—be acquiescent, always agree with your husband, don’t stand your ground. Mother always says, ‘It’s woman’s nature to be weaker and to forgive, and not to argue all the time.’ And she always says, ‘Don’t be so *principled*,’ and in that my mother is really no different from many women my age.

“But don’t misunderstand me, I have no complaints about her. Mother is a wonderful woman, she gave to us with all her heart. She gave us all of her. If I could only have her natural wisdom. You have to understand Mother within her generation—they lived their lives without my conflicts. There was no consciousness of repression. There was nothing to spur them to rebel, not even to criticism. You’ll think it’s funny, but I envy them for that, because they received solid values and forms of thought and behavior at home. They were not exposed to other elements that presented them with the opposite, with the temptation. They had security and serenity, and I—” She chuckles. “And don’t think that Mother has no gripes about us. Our way of life is perhaps not what she wanted. And she always complained that she had no daughters at home, because we studied and then went to work and married right away and had careers … Because just as I miss having a mother who is a friend, she misses having a daughter who is a friend. Things I do hurt her, and I remember that when I wanted to go for my master’s degree she yelled at me: Stop! That’s enough! You’re already twenty-two, get married! What will become of you! And every time I refused someone who came to ask for my hand, she would scream at me.”

“She’s just saying that so you’ll think a lot of guys wanted to marry her,” Abed interjects, straight-faced.

“My grandmother once tallied it up for Abed. It came to thirty.”

“Maybe they were all bused in together?”

“And what happened in the end?” Tagrid smiles. “I had to battle society, I suffered and argued, and afterward my sisters had it easy. Now I have a sister who’s two years younger than me, twenty-seven, and they don’t pressure her to marry at all.”

I quoted what I’d heard from Rima Othman of Beit Safafa. She said that in London she had met “Arabs that are completely outside.” “A boy and girl from the Sabra refugee camp in Lebanon. They originally come from Acre. The girl told me, It’s not good that you Israeli Arab women have identified with the intifadah to the point that you’re putting off marriage. You have to have a lot of weddings, make a lot of children. They said that if someone from their refugee camp is killed, they immediately hold a wedding on his grave, and the dead person’s mother dances.”

“As regards the children”—Abed clears his throat—“that is, how many we’ll have—we have a dispute about that.”

“What dispute?” Tagrid asks. “How many did you want?”

“Not a lot, but as many as possible.”

“I’d actually be satisfied with as few as possible.”

Abed: “Me too. Six. Okay, five.”

“Abed!”

“What are you shouting about? We’ve already got 50 percent, almost.”

“If the next time I have a boy, you’re out of luck.”

He gags. “But children grow and leave home …”

Tagrid turns slowly to him, with all the resplendence of a sunflower. “When I have you, Abed, I don’t need the children!”

We all laugh. We even laugh too much. And I laugh, too, as if it all was the warm laziness of the afternoon and honeyed stings between the young man and woman. As if a Jew and two Arabs in Israel can have a friendly laugh over a joke relating to the “demographic threat.”

“We have no desire to have more children ‘for the homeland’ and at the expense of our own lives,” Tagrid says. “I’m not selfish, but I think that if I have three children I’ll be able to educate them better and bring them up properly; they’ll contribute to society much more than nine that won’t receive a good education, that we won’t be able to support.”

“May our holy womb be blessed!” I quote a headline that was printed, until just a few years ago, in the Israeli-Arab press. “Victory will come not on the battlefield but in the delivery rooms!”

Tagrid listens attentively. She meditates. “No. I want very much to have a small family, so I can devote time to things that are important to me. It is important to me to have a career. It is important to me to be a sociologist. It is important to me to work for Israeli-Arab society. If I have a lot of children, I’ll be stuck at home. My ambitions will die.”

“If I were hearing that for the first time, I’d get mad,” Abed sighs. “But I’ve gotten used to it.”

“Admit that it was no surprise to you! Admit that before our wedding we spoke about it explicitly!”

“I talked about that when you weren’t here,” he says, his face somewhat forlorn.

“You’re so fair!”

A few days later I woke up in the village of Iksal, near Nazareth, between Mount Tabor and the Nazareth heights. I wandered the streets—a village of no beauty, cubical cement houses and potholed roads, with electric poles running down the middle. But the yards are thick with apricot and guava trees, palms, figs, and pomegranates. Bare-legged women doused their houses with jugs of water, scrubbed the steps, and beat out rugs. A young woman sent out a clean and polished boy, smoothly combed, and half hid behind her door, leaning on a straw broom, watching him until he was swallowed up by a band of boisterous children. I walked after him, partly for her, partly to test myself—when exactly would the moment come when I no longer remembered her kiss on his cheek and he turned, for me, into *shabab*, a faceless young Arab.

In this very village, a month before, a young woman was murdered. Her brothers and father are suspected of burning her alive because, they claim, she became pregnant by a strange man. When I asked people about her their features slammed shut. “You know our culture,” said Leila D. “The Arabs cannot tolerate a disgrace like that … they had to kill her …” “Still,” dared a girl sipping morning coffee with three older women, “they could have taken her to the hospital in Afula to have an abortion, no?” The three women bowed their heads, did not respond.

“Had she obeyed the laws of Islam, it would not have happened,” I was told by Muhammed Saliman, Iksal’s baker and a member of the Islamic Movement. “According to that law, if an unmarried girl has sinned, she is to receive eighty lashes with a whip. If she’s married, she is to be stoned until she dies.” Something in my expression, in my secular skepticism, maddened him; his hands beat down the dough.