

Rachel Kadish
from *Come On Zion Put Your Hands Together*

Between themselves, Ahmed and Karen had an agreement: They did not take Israeli-Palestinian cases. They no longer discussed in detail events of the Middle East. Their hopes for the region were identical but when they took up the topic they inflamed one another. They'd endured trans-Atlantic hauls on which their voices rose over a shared newspaper, other passengers glaring in the tight confines of the tin can bearing them over the ocean at an impossibly slow speed; they'd arrived sapped at the far shore's blaring airport and the conclusion that their differences were matters of inflection. They'd learned, in the manner of a long-married couple, to provoke and to trust. Above all, to trust. Once a limping white-haired woman at a Sidney reception had singled Karen out. Identifying herself as a member of the hosting organization, the woman lilted, We've covered everything. So you don't have to worry. I know you Jews hate to pay the bill. Before Karen had absorbed the remark Ahmed rose and informed the woman that she was to leave. A crowd gathered. It's always the sinned-against who walk out in protest, Ahmed said. But that's wrong. The racists are the one who need to leave the party. The woman left, but not before receiving a further blast of Ahmed's fury. Tears made rivulets in the woman's face-powder. Ahmed watched the limping retreat of her broad figure. Drink in hand, he stared stonily out the window before shrugging off the incident. She'll die soon, he said.

Ahmed in an argument was a wolf shaking its prey long after its neck was broken. Those who stepped outside the boundary of his principled tolerance learned to fear his anger. Karen trusted it, matched it when necessary. She censured a Jewish co-panelist at a

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Washington convention who denigrated the quality of Palestinian literature; did not relent until the organization invited a Palestinian poet to open the following year's conference.

She was not above goading him, and he condoned her raciness with a puckered half-smile. On a long-ago panel someone had asked her to comment on the latest problems in Arab-Jewish relations. She said, He snores.

Her intimate knowledge of his snoring was, in truth, gleaned from one lone experience. But let the audience imagine. They weren't lovers; they were more.

Now they were lost. On double lanes of blacktop, ancestral routes, they shot southward without landmark. At a roadblock they were hailed by an Israeli soldier who squinted past Ahmed to Karen and found in her freckled skin and blue jeans justification for a lazy wave. She opened her mouth to ask directions but Ahmed was already swinging the wheel, narrowly skirting the cement blockades.

"These rentals aren't allowed in the West Bank," she reminded him. Not with their yellow Israeli license plates, beacons for trouble.

He didn't answer. The long loop south condoned by the rental company would add forty-five minutes to their travel. He was going to drive them through the West Bank.

"At least let's stay on the main road," she said.

For the first time that morning, Ahmed assessed her with a long look. "You've gone native."

"Special for the occasion." She touched the silver hamsa at her throat, a birthday gift from David. Call it a good luck charm. She felt the need for luck, though when she asked herself what luck would be her mind supplied only blankness. The silver chain around her

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neck was weightless. Every curve of the road unleashed a heavy feeling in her gut that declared itself, incrementally, to be nausea.

“Where’s your ring?” he asked.

She fanned her bare fingers. “I don’t travel with it.”

“Too valuable?”

She looked at him.

His firm nod erased any bite the words might have held. When he referred to her fiancé it was always with respect: a tipping of his hat at the boundary of another man’s turf.

Her engagement, just two months old, was the reason they were here. Why else would Ahmed have capitulated? They’d been invited to Israel dozens of times before. This time—so he’d said when he phoned her office from Milan--his speaking invitation to neighboring Jordan made accepting the Israelis’ invitation only logical. But logic, she knew, was incidental. He’d acceded to the assignment because the two of them needed it.