

Down the Market

[Short Story]

By Selma Dabbagh

It takes us ages to get to their house from the airport. First thing he says to me is that it's a bad time for me to be coming. Not, 'Welcome,' or, 'Have a nice trip?' or anything like that. Just that it was a bad time and the way he looks at me is like I should know what he's on about. So I just nod my head and think that as far as I'm concerned I'm going to have a damn good time because I'm the one who got here over that smart-arse David Levenstein and I'm the one with the two hundred quid travel money in my pocket, not him.

Uncle Abe – well, Ben at the Aliyah Society told me to call him 'Uncle', but he's nothing like my uncles, I can tell you – has got this long beard and a massive great gun across his back. Ben had shown me a photo of him before I left, but because he was smiling in that one and didn't have the glasses he looked different, sort of Father Christmassy. I am well impressed by the gun and ask if I can look at it and he says not now because it's loaded but when we get to their place I can try some out on their range. Wicked, I think. Wait till I tell them that when I get back. Then I ask him whether he's in the army and he bites my head off, telling me that they are a bunch of sell-outs who don't defend anyone and that you can only trust yourself and your own kind. I decide not to ask so many questions after that, but it is hard as everything is new and I've never been out of London on a plane before.

Ben had told me hardly anything about Abe's family. He'd been planning for me to go to some kibbutz farm until it fell through and Abe's group had come forward saying they'd have me instead. Ben had looked kind of nervous when he told me, like he was doing something he shouldn't do, and kept saying, 'These people are very loyal to their country, do you understand?' and at first I'd thought Union Jacks and National Front and freaked a bit until I realized they didn't exist there anyway and they wouldn't be asking to have a Jewish kid staying with them. I was a bit relieved not to be going to a farm. I don't do pigs and all that muck.

I wanted to sit in the front, but Abe tells me to get in the back and sticks the gun on the front seat. He's got this real American-TV-type accent, like the guys in the programme my Nan finds so funny, *Taxi*, and I want to ask him if he's from the same place but don't know

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that he'd like that question either.

It's all motorway and not so different from home, just hotter and yellower. There are lots of big adverts with smiling girls eating yoghurt with Hebrew writing. There's no one about because it's six in the morning. It gets different when we get to the hills, which are more deserty, like in *Indiana Jones*, but it's still all early morning wishy-washy with only the lines of the hills showing. Then we come to this place where there are all these men just standing in lines by the side of the road with cabins with police in, like you get in the City, except they have short Uzi guns and a small star of David on their uniforms. There are also these big concrete cubes in the road, like the ones I saw on the beaches with my Nan, which she says were built during the war to stop the Germans coming in and, like I said, all these men are just standing there and there is a big long line of traffic behind them. They are the first people I have seen since we left the airport. No one's talking to them and they're not talking to each other. They look like the Turks down on Green Lanes with droopy moustaches and belted suit trousers. They are a bit dusty and sad-looking. I ask, 'What's that?' and he just says, 'Checkpoint. Arabs.'

So sure, cool, he doesn't like talking.

Then he catches me off guard by asking about my bar mitzvah and I try to move on because I am still scared someone is going to find me out because there's some stuff I wrote on my hand and cheated off when I did the Aliyah reading and there's no way I could do it again. He says it's a great idea, this two Aliyahs, so we connect becoming a full Jew with bar mitzvah, getting older and coming to Israel, meeting Jews who've done the second type of Aliyah by emigrating to Israel, and I say, 'Sure,' because I am still well chuffed about the money in my pocket and the plane ride. I liked take-off more than landing. Brilliant the way the plane tips after you go up, like a motorbike taking a sharp corner. Then he says that so many Jews in the West end up marrying goyim, almost half, and then they forget what being a Jew is about, so it's a good thing I am coming here and seeing what being a Jew is all about. I agree, then say, 'What's a goyim?' and he turns round and stares at me like I am stupid, then shouts, 'You don't know what a goy is? A non-Jew like these filthy Arabs.' Then he says, 'You're not going to marry a goy, are you, boy?'

I think about the dusty men on the side of the road and say, 'No.' Then I start wondering about the girls in my class and think the only one who's Jewish is that Ruth The Tooth Weissmann and I wouldn't want to marry her either. She wears these really naff socks with lace turn-overs. I wonder if Susie Black is a goyim. That bastard Adam Blandford saying I shouldn't even look at her as she's out of my league. Should've punched him. He won't say that when he hears about me doing rifle shooting.

I see this old woman walking down the side of the road carrying a pot on her head. She's

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wearing a long black dress with red flowers stitched around the hem. I say, 'What's that on her head?' and he says, 'Water,' and I think that's quite cool too because it's like going to Africa or something, like Adam Blandford's brother who went to Mexico for his year out and lived with a peasant family in the hills eating worms and stuff, and I wonder whether I'll have to carry water at Abe's place.

We have to slow down when we go through a town where the houses are close to the road and the road gets narrower. Some shops are starting to open and men are sloshing water out on to the pavements and wiping them down. I see some women who must be Muslims because their heads are covered like the ones you see around the Whitechapel mosque. One of them has little toddlers but when she sees our car she pushes them behind her, so we can't see them any more. I am going to ask Abe whether he saw her do that when there's a *ping* as a stone hits the windscreen, like when you are driving too fast on gravel, and he says, 'Bastard Arabs!' and something else in Hebrew that I don't get and leans over to the passenger seat. The windscreen looks OK to me but Abe's going really slow, looking up at the houses, but everyone's gone, even the woman with the toddlers. All just vanished like when characters get zapped in cartoons. Then he speeds up and we're out of there in seconds.

'These fucking politicians!' he says, and I laugh because it's kind of cool to have an adult say that when they are talking to you. Ben at the Society went ape when I just said, 'Shit' in front of him and the only other adult I know who swears when talking to me is the wino near the school, who just rants, '*Ya fuckin', fuckin', fuckin',*' every time anyone goes near his bench. 'They were meant to build us a road around that village but they keep changing their minds. They're going to sacrifice us like lambs with their stupidity. Should bulldoze the lot of them.' When he says that I can see him going at the Houses of Parliament in a giant yellow Caterpillar and somehow, with him looking all angry like that, you could really see him doing it.

We don't talk for the rest of the way. It's hot in the car with the sun shining through the windscreen on to us and I start wishing I hadn't worn my new Tommy Hilfiger top because it's going to get all spoilt if I sweat and stuff. The entry to where they live is really wild. The road goes on and on up a hill and the hill is completely circled with a fence higher than the walls around Holloway Prison and there's barbed wire wrapped around the top. There are sentry posts with searchlights every so often all around it with ladders going up to them. Like tree houses for grown-ups. We have to stop for the guards, but get waved in as soon as they see that it's Abe. It makes me think of the film *The Great Escape*. I ask if I can go up into a watch tower and Abe says, 'No' and looks at me like I am starting to piss him off.

When you come in, though, it's different – like another world. There are lots of red-roofed

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toy-town houses sitting far apart from each other and they have big lawns and sprinklers and pools! It's like everyone has their own pool. It's the kind of place where people carry brown bags full of 'groceries' and say, 'Honey, I'm home,' and kids play in the streets all day. Wicked, I think.

Abe tells me that of his five kids the boys around my age are at Yeshuva summer school and really I should go too but they couldn't get a place in time, so only his daughter, Tamara, who's a bit older than me, and the baby are in the house. This is kind of a bummer because Ben had told me there were boys my age, but I'm glad that there were no places at the Yeshuva. No way was I going back to school in the holidays.

There are a bunch of men at Abe's house waiting for him when we arrive. They look like Abe but some are skinnier and nerdylooking. They are all wearing guns like he did at the airport, across the back. They look through me as we go to the door, although I can see Abe talking about me and chucking his thumb in my direction. One of them pulls my bag as I go past him into the house and says, 'Hey, when you go back, you tell your government to give us some support. Yeah. Stop being such Arab lovers,' and they all laugh because the way he pulled my bag made me wobble a bit.

Abe's wife, Ada, sounds just like him. She's shiny fat and wears a scarf on her head kind of like a Muslim woman and a big T-shirt saying, 'You Talking to Me?' It's the biggest house I have ever stayed in. It's so big it even has double things, like there are two dishwashers, two ovens, two sinks in the kitchen and two bedrooms for Abe and his wife. Then I meet Tamara and I think, Eat your heart out, Adam Blandford! because she is really, I mean really, fit. Sort of like the teeny pop stars my sister pins to her wall. And she says, 'Yeah, hi, limey,' and I don't know what this means, but I am really glad I did wear my Tommy Hilfiger T-shirt after all.

Abe's wife says they are going to pray and do I want to join in? so I pretend that I am really tired and lie in my room for a while. There are no cool posters in the boys' room that I am staying in, just a huge one of a big old building saying 'Returning Soon – King Solomon's Temple' and I think maybe it's a film like *Atlantis*. I sit on the bed and check my logbook from the plane that the pilot signed for me and figure I have to come here and go back another eight and a half times to get a flying badge, which is a bit of a downer. I take off my T-shirt and sleep for a bit in the rest of my clothes on top of the sheets.

At lunch Abe says again that I've come at a bad time and Ada agrees. I don't think I can ask why, so I say, 'How long have you lived here?'

Tamara silently mimics me across the table, and Ada says, 'We were called here five years ago to perform our duty to God and our fellow Jews,' then Ada looks at me and says, 'I bet your mom is happy you are here.' She squeezes her head into her chin when she says

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this and I just say, 'Yes.' Then Abe and Ada start talking to each other like I'm not there.

'It's the army's fault for taking his gun. It was pure murder – they knew the Arabs would recognize him and he'd be attacked,' Abe is saying, and I say, 'Why did they take his gun?', which makes me feel like someone in a gangster movie, and Abe looks pissed off again when he replies, 'They had no reason. No reason.' He prods his fingers into the table when he speaks. 'He was just defending his people and our land. They were saying he was causing trouble and going on too many sprees around here, but it's bullshit.' I giggle at that but Tamara doesn't even look up. She's sucking spaghetti from her plate. I don't understand what Abe said but pretend that I do. Abe's ignoring me again and talking to Ada.

'I said to the guys that we should suspect the Arabs who drove him to hospital first but they told me that they were clean. So I says, "About as likely to find a clean Arab as to find a kosher pig!"' They both laugh a lot and I do a bit too, because I know pigs aren't kosher. 'But it looks like this new army commander is going to make some changes round here. He's already told us that the curfew's been on again since the attack and will carry on until four, then will start again at six, so if we want to go down there we need to get moving by three-thirty.' Then he says to Tamara, who's now looking up at him, 'Wanna go down the market, honey?' and she gives this big grin and says, 'Yeah, cool.'

'Do you want to take your new friend from London with you and show him what it's all about?'

I think of the two hundred quid folded in the envelope in my pocket and think maybe the market will have PlayStation 2 and a mobile like Adam Blandford's or maybe, I think as I look at Tamara, some cool clothes.

'Sure, Daddy,' she says, 'we'll go with Aaron too.'

'I've only got English money,' I say.

'Hey, don't worry about money,' says Abe, and I figure I'm about to be given a treat.

Before we go Ada takes ages covering Tamara's face and arms with sunscreen lotion and then hands me the tube, but I just rub a bit on my hands and give it back.

The town's just down the hill but we all go in convoy with lots of cars and the guys who were standing outside the door talking to Abe when I came and some of their kids. There are lots of flags and it feels like a celebration, a street festival or something. Except everyone has a gun, even some of the kids my age.

In the car I try to make a joke about Aaron, Abe and Ada's names sounding like something from Dr Seuss's children's books (I say, 'Like you got a fox in your socks too?') and Aaron gets really nasty, shows me all his tracky metal teeth and says to Tamara, 'I think your English friend is a Mussy,' and I ask, 'What's a Mussy?'

So Tamara says, 'A Mussy is a Jew who can't stand up for himself. A Mussy can't defend

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the Jews. Jews who died in the Holocaust died because they were Mussies.’ I’ve never hit a girl, like ever, but the idea that she is saying my Nan losing all her family in Poland was my Nan’s fault or my fault makes me so wild I can’t really speak. My chest is banging too much. But like that wasn’t enough, then she says, ‘A Mussy is a pussy,’ and I know that Abe’s heard her because I can see him smiling in the rear-view mirror.

I’m even more gutted when we get to the town. It’s poor-looking, like the town we have driven through with the woman carrying water. Everything is closed too. All I can see are metal shutters and lots of spray-paint graffiti and black and white pictures of men, women and children plastered all over the walls with writing in what I figure is Arabic under them. One of them says ‘Martyr’ in English and I want to ask Abe about this word but he’s looking really serious so I don’t. I see some red spray-paint graffiti saying ‘FUCK ISRAEL’ and I want to show someone but don’t do that either. There are some flags too, painted on walls; not like the ones we’ve got, these are green, white, red and black with stripes and a triangle, not a star. It’s really quiet. I can just hear some birds chirping in the trees and the sound of the air conditioning in Abe’s car whirring away.

Then there’s a sound of shutters going up all at once and, really fast, people start coming out of the houses. Some stalls get set up so quickly you could blink and miss it. Makes the guys on our market look like a bunch of dossers. Men, women and children come out of houses and alleys and open-topped trucks come in with food – vegetables and things – and everyone is crammed into this space buying, selling and shouting but like they are all on play and fast forward pressed down together.

Our jeeps are down a bit from where the market is. It’s sort of a stage platform up there, but the shoppers don’t seem to see us, or just look over at us quickly and move away. We all seem to be waiting. I keep thinking, If we just want to go through, why didn’t we do it when it was all clear and if we need to buy stuff, why don’t we go now? I can see the army over on the far side, about six soldiers standing in front of some jeeps with stars on, and they have Uzis too, like the ones at the checkpoint. Near them there’s an odd bunch of people by some white jeeps. They are some women wearing black, a couple of nuns and some young men and women in T-shirts and jeans. They are all holding banners and some of them have got expensive-looking cameras around their necks. Everyone is watching the people shopping.

Then Abe says, ‘Go’ and there are some horns honked and everyone starts piling out of the cars. Aaron and Tamara scream, ‘Come on, move it,’ at me and I just follow.

When the people see us coming, they try to do in reverse what they have just done when putting out the stalls: they try to fold them all up again, but they can’t do it as fast. There are some people at the back of the crowd who are screaming as they still haven’t bought

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anything, but it's too late. The shutters are all coming down, the truck engines are back on and stuff is being hurled on to the backs of them.

Tamara and Aaron, her metal-mouthed friend, go ahead of me and run up to one of the stalls that hasn't quite folded away yet and yank everything on to the floor. For a second I think that they've maybe just slammed into it by mistake, then I see them grab some bags from a woman who's shopping and throw everything in them on to the ground and jump on it – all these cucumbers and tomatoes. They pick up some of the tomatoes and start pelting them at the shoppers like it's a game of paintball. The grown-ups with us start doing the same thing but they are also using their guns to knock food on to the ground and smash up stalls with the butts. There's lots of pushing and grabbing and I can see a kid down on the ground in a bright green tracksuit trying to pick up some cucumbers and I don't know how he can stay there because I feel sure they're going to stamp on his fingers. The men and women with the banners start taking pictures and the army comes forward and stops them from getting any closer. I hear one soldier shouting something in Hebrew, then he grabs the camera and smashes it on the ground.

The square is emptying pretty quickly but Tamara and Aaron move so fast I don't know where they are. Then I see her leaning back with this rock in her hand and there's like a *whoo-whack* sound as it flies, then hits the head of an old man in a long white robe with a white headscarf and blood gloops out of his head all over his clothes. This old nun starts going crazy when she sees that and screams at Abe, 'How can you do this? How can you let your children grow up as murderers? You think this is what God commands?' and he goes over to her, and *shit*, this I couldn't believe. He just smacks her right across the face and says, 'Shut up, you Nazi.' I mean this woman is older than my Nan. It's so hard to remember what happened next because there was so much going on. The group with the nun are trying to look after her and shouting at the army in Hebrew, then the kid, and I recognize him, the one in green who was on the ground, gets up and pelts Abe in the head with a stone. Man, that took some guts. He's a skinny little bugger too and younger than me and Abe's holding his gun and all.

It is then that the army really move, their guns doing *kerchunk, kerchunk* and I am thinking, well, just thinking, Shit! Shit! I mean you don't think straight really. I know I thought, 'I need to get out of the way,' and there was this voice in my head just going, '*RUUUN!! RUUUN!!*' So I run across the square because I think there is somewhere I can hide and the kid runs down there too and overtakes me. He's as fast as a ferret and I don't know why I follow him but he seems to know where he's going and it's like the mazes in *Tomb Raider* back there, really narrow alleys and the walls of houses with closed-up windows on either side. The soldiers come out behind me and they're like in *Terminator*, with these big heavy

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legs that swing out from the hip. They're scary all right but it seems this kid thinks he can outwit them. He's hopping around and really taking the piss, sticking his head out from behind corners, lobbing cucumbers at them and calling out insults, taunting them. He treats it like some game. I tell you, I ain't no sissy but I wouldn't be treating it like some game if I had these guys after me down some alley. No way. I'd be out there with the white hanky, me.

I find some steps round the side of a shop and I go up on to a low roof. When I get up there the kid's gone but the soldiers are still pointing their guns down the alley. I can hear some children screaming in one of the houses and I see a door open and a kid just run out into the alley. He's a little boy, younger than the other one, and you can hear his mother screaming for him to come in but he's out in the alley in his pyjamas and has seen the soldiers pointing their guns at him and he just can't move. One of the soldiers goes up to him, picks him up by the scruff of his neck and sticks his gun in his stomach. I guess they were really riled after all that teasing with the other kid but there's just no way they could've thought it was the same one. And the boy, he just pisses himself. I mean, *really* pisses himself. You can see his pyjama bottoms go dark and it starts dripping down off his feet. His eyes are really big and he's saying, 'Mama, mama.' It kills me.

I keep thinking they're going to let him go, that it's all some kind of joke. Then all the doors in the alley open at the same time and all these women come out screaming, '*ibni, ibni.*' Well, that's what it sounded like anyway, and some of them are also saying in English, 'My son, my son.' So I guess that's what it meant. This confuses the soldiers a bit. They just stand there with the boy dangling and dripping and crying for one of his mothers and they don't know what to do. I kind of guess they're thinking it is better to go out with any boy rather than go out empty-handed. They're not even looking at the women, though, and I get the feeling that the kid being covered in piss is bothering them more than the women but you can't really tell.

I look up for a second and see the kid in the green tracksuit on the other side of the alley on a roof. He sees me too and gives me this big grin, winks and puts his finger to his mouth. He's like Peter Pan the way he bounces around. He waves his hand down, showing me to get below the wall, so I do and then he must have stuck his head over the top because I hear him shouting, '*Ay, ya shlomo,*' at the soldiers and shots being fired up into the air. It's not funny being on a roof with guns being fired up right next to you, I tell you. I shat myself.

When it stops I move across the roof on my tummy and there is all this crap up there, cartridge cases, drink cans, crisp packets and in one corner, I don't want to look, but I think it's real crap. I mean human, not dog or anything. Someone must've been up there for a long time.

From the other side of the roof I put my head up again and can see the elf boy hopping across the roofs among the Eiffel Tower TV aerials and satellite dishes like he hasn't a care

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in the world. There's the heavy sound of the soldiers running further down the alley and I can hear a boy sobbing, so I reckon they must've dumped the other one.

The roof is a whole separate layer of town. I can see the hills and the place where Abe and Ada live, which is really quite near but looks unreal, like a painting by numbers compared with everything else. A wind is getting up and there are heavy dark clouds moving low and close from the hills. They are so low there are splodges of shadow following right under them. I start going from roof to roof. I can see Abe's car parked over to the right and the kid's going the other way and I head in his general direction. Nothing else is moving except for this big white luxury coach which is driving in. BIBLE TOURS OF THE HOLY LAND, it says in loopy writing. From where I am I can still see the kid popping along and now I have a clear view of the wider alley that the soldiers are going down. The kid runs away from me, making sure they see him. Then he goes down low and moves back towards me bent double. When he gets close he dips down some steps and runs into the alley.

I think he is trying to shake them off by getting on to the other side, but when he gets down there he turns. There can't have been any steps on the other side, so he stays on the alley going the opposite way to the soldiers, but the coach is there, slap bang in his face, at the end, blocking his way. I can see him and the coach, In the alley I see a door opening a bit and a woman try to get the boy to come in but he can't have seen her or heard her because he doesn't react and it's like he's having to think twice, but he doesn't really get the chance because one of the soldiers swivels and sees him and they're all shouting to each other. So the kid just leaps on to his belly and starts scraping his way under the coach like a dog. They start firing at him. There are still some old fogies in sloppy clothes and baseball hats getting off the coach and they all start screaming. Yanks, I think, because I hear one screeching, *'Dear Gawd! Oh, dear Gawd!'*

But the soldiers are already there almost. It's not a long alley, two hundred yards or so, and they are shooting at the boy like maniacs and I think, Shit, this kid's got the lives of a cat, as I see his feet pushing him forward. But one of the soldiers must've hit a tyre because there's this *bam! bam!* Then a lurch as the coach leans over to one side, like a horse sitting back. Dust and sand blow up against the wall. When it stops the feet are still scraping but the soldiers are there and now I feel my whole neck tighten and my chest heave. Now he's really stuck.

When his feet stop I let my insides go. I spew Ada's lunch on the roof and I keep on puking even when there's nothing left inside, when it's just green bubbles and fluffy spit. I am shaking like I did when I got hit by a car that one time outside school. I can't stop the shakes so I stop trying to stop them as it makes it worse to try.

The wind's really got up when I go over to the jeeps. It's an angry wind with glass grains

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in it that cut. There are two ambulances by the cars we came in. Medics are with Abe, who's got a butterfly plaster on his forehead. Abe's also got Tamara, a rabbi and some of his friends around him. Otherwise the ambulances are empty. I can't see the old man or the nun. An army officer is explaining something to a guy from Bible Tours. Soldiers are trying to jack up the coach to change the tyre and get the kid out. I see the body as they pull it out – red all over the green with the hair a black smudge.

Abe calls me a schmuck and says the Arabs could've killed me with me going in there. I don't say anything. He calls over one of the other guys and tells him to arrange for Bible Tours to come over to their place for a talk to understand the problems that the community faces. The other guy says, 'Great idea,' and slaps Abe on the back and Abe gives this 'all in a day's work' type shrug.

It's really pelting down when we're in the car and Abe's swearing at the road and the weather. I don't talk on the way back. I think they can smell the sick on me. When we get to their house I lie on the bed and try to get the boy winking out of my head and the taste of spew out of my mouth. I sit up and take from my pocket the envelope with the two hundred pounds in no longer slippery twenty-pound notes. I go in to see Abe and I look straight at him and tell him I shouldn't be here. I tell him I faked the Aliyah reading and that I cheated. I tell him that David Levenstein should've won. I tell him that we should arrange for me to go back because it's not right. He kind of laughs and I wonder whether he's about to say, 'Schmuck' again but he says he'll phone the travel agents.

'It'll cost you,' he says, so I say, 'I've got money,' and I like saying that. He gets out his phone, has a conversation in Hebrew and then turns back to me and gives me a figure in shekels. He takes out a calculator. One hundred and ninety-eight pounds and forty-three pence.

'I've got money,' I say again but like saying it a bit less this time.

I know this'll sound funny but what I hear when I think back on when we returned up the hill that day is this warbling, wailing sound coming from the town. It was like lots of women, but I don't know how they would've done it. It was a beating, fluttery sound like birds going up into a stormy sky and it was kind of spooky. Spooky but joyful and triumphant. I know it doesn't make much sense; you had to have heard it. To me, it sounded like a warning, but I don't think anyone else was listening.

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