

Nechama's Gun

Joshua Bernstein

With the last bus of the night pulling into the station, a woman faces a dilemma: what to do with an abandoned M16 rifle.

She wasn't so much mystified by the gun as amused that the soldier had left it. Nechama Wasserman, age fifty-seven, had just finished shopping for herring at the *Shuk*. She was slumped on a bench in the bus station, palming her chin, musing over the fact that Tzvi, the Number 189's driver, was running seven minutes late, despite being German by birth, and he was going to hear it from the crowd, all of whom were about to strangle each other in anxiety over the time—it was less than two hours until dusk, a miniscule amount in West Jerusalem—when she noticed that a) her herring was leaking and b) the young, freckled soldier who had been dozing on the bench beside her had dashed aboard the 402, which was now pulling out of the garage, even though his M16 rifle lay propped against the wall.

Nechama examined it briefly. Then she eyed an Ethiopian janitor beside her who was squeezing out a mop. The station was a madhouse behind her. Nechama didn't know what to do. She figured she should notify the janitor, or perhaps the little men who sat behind the raised windows at the head of the hall. But what if a terrorist claimed it? What if it went off? What if the boy returned? Would he be disciplined for it, as she thought, in which case *she* would have been the instigator? What would Reb Moshe have thought?

To make matters worse, her bus was now pulling in—the last one of the day—and she didn't have money for a cab. Plus her husband was already about to kill her for having raced out to get fish. But what could she do? Her new son-in-law was coming this evening, and she hadn't even baked a dessert.

For reasons that Nechama did not and would never understand, she grabbed the M16 and stuck it, barrel-down, in her nylon-bag shopping cart, alongside her potatoes and fish.

As her bus slogged west through traffic, beneath the dim shroud of a sun, Nechama sat gripping her shopping cart, reciting psalms from her Tanakh:

Gird thy sword upon thy thigh, O mighty one, thy glory and thy majesty.

She prayed that it wouldn't go off. These things came with a safety, didn't they?

Finally, she couldn't take it any longer. She thought about telling Dvora, across the aisle, or Miriam, three rows behind her. But wouldn't that discredit her husband? What was she doing with a gun? She bit her thumb and rose, sweatily yanking her cart down the aisle.

"Tzvi," she screamed. "Lemme out."

"We're in the middle of Route 1."

"I don't care. It's an emergency." She pointed to her dress.

"Okay." Tzvi had seen worse on this line.

The bus dropped her off outside Abu Ghosh, a small Arab village three kilometers east of her interchange. She thought about burying the gun in the brush by the road, but what would that do to her nails? She wiped her brow with her snood and climbed the dirt road until she arrived at a bakery. It was the only store open in town.

"*Salaam*," she told the clerk, who was smoking.

"We closed."

"I just need to sit down."

"We closed."

"Okay. Well, what if I buy something? How 'bout a cake?"

"We finished."

"Maybe you could make me another one?"

The young mustachioed man stuck his Camels in his jeans. "You not have enough for that."

"Are you sure?" said Nechama, reaching inside of her cart.

Santa Monica, California

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Joshua Bernstein's stories have appeared in *Shenandoah*, *Tin House Online*, *Kenyon Review Online*, and other journals.