

SUNDAY, AUGUST 17, 1997

CHAPTER 29: *LEAVING THE DESERT*

"And the Lord said unto me in the days of Josiah the king: 'Hast thou seen ... [the] backsliding Israel did? She went up upon every high mountain and under every leafy tree and there played the harlot.'" (JEREMIAH 3:6)

I awakened sore, stiff, and still tired. Again, I showered and then, in solitude, spent the morning photographing the garden. At noon Shai and Vered appeared, bringing breakfast to the patio. Afterward, we prepared for our departure, me to Jerusalem and Shai and Vered farther north to the Galilee.

I felt disquiet as we organized. As lovers parting, we lingered—packing and repacking—in a vain attempt to extend our time together. In the end, we squabbled to break the intimacy and, thereby, to ease the pain of separation.

We pulled away from the caravan as the shadows began to lengthen, cramped as wandering vagabonds into Shai's ancient Toyota. Vered sat tucked into the back, surrounded by the paraphernalia of family travel—bags stuffed with sandwiches and dried fruit, water bottles, and the suitcases that couldn't be crammed into the trunk.

As we descended the narrow road toward the Ovdah Valley, four gazelles sauntered 30 yards to our right. Shai slowed to a stop. Unlike the gazelles of the Arava, they ignored us. Living here, they had become used to the sound of cars. We watched as they disappeared up the *wadi*.

From the Ovdah Valley, we followed in reverse the route that Tomer and I had driven from Qetura Junction more than two weeks before. We reached the cut-off, but rather than descending into the Arava, we continued north.

The void of the Negev encompassed us. To the east, the crimson peaks of Edom faded into the twilight. To the west, barely discernible, lay the broken ridges of the Wilderness of Paran. In between spread an empty, rubble-covered expanse.

A full moon rose, painted a surreal red by the last rays of the sun. It hung large in the

sky, seeming to demand homage. I envisioned worshippers at the Temple of Hathor paying it tribute.

The night grew deeper. I tried to recall the sensuality that I had felt in the enveloping darkness after the wild dogs. To no avail. Even though the road was deserted, our headlights plunging through the otherwise unlit night began to unravel my connection with the desert.

We followed the weaving road for almost two hours, traversing the Negev Plateau and climbing into the Negev Hills. We saw virtually no signs of human presence. No more than a handful of cars passed us driving south.

Shai and I talked of the desert. We agreed that it was easier to enter than to leave. Entering imposes a physical burden. Leaving imposes a psychological one, an uneasiness that both of us felt but neither could fully explain. Perhaps that burden stems from a sense of loss, as if in leaving we sever our tie with a compelling essence that resides there, the understanding of which lies beyond our comprehension.

We passed through Ramon Crater, in reality a gigantic eroded bowl almost 5 miles across and more than 20 miles long. Here roam the handful of remaining Negev leopards. Winding out of the Crater, we entered Mizpeth Ramon, a dot on the road map halfway to Be'er Sheva. It was the first way station since we had left the Ovdah Valley. We stopped briefly to buy gas.

We continued toward Be'er Sheva. It was there that the shepherds of Abraham and those of Abimelech, the Philistine, fought over the well of water. And it was there that Abraham planted the tamarisk to symbolize the oath of peace that he swore with Abimelech. Today, Be'er Sheva is a raucous frontier town, settled mostly by recent Russian immigrants, and marked by rows of new flats, dusty streets, and gaudy neon lights. From Be'er Sheva, roads fan out to Ashkelon and Tel Aviv, in Israel, and Hebron, now in Palestine. We turned toward Tel Aviv.

Just beyond Be'er Sheva, the road curves slightly to the left. At the beginning of the curve, our headlights picked out the figure of a woman standing at the road's edge. She had positioned herself so that even the driver of a fully loaded truck could see her and would have sufficient time and distance to stop. As we drew closer, I could see that she was tall and blond, almost certainly a recent Russian immigrant. As we reached her, our headlights revealed her painted face. The hardness of her features jarred me. With three years of hard work, she could save enough to buy an apartment and retire from her trade. Her empty allure served as a metaphor of the world to which we were returning.