

Under the Pressure of Time



THE WOMAN IN BLACK SITTING NEXT TO ME IN THE FRONT seat, right behind the driver of Bus 18, probably didn't imagine that during this ride I would get to hear her voice, learn her name, and that she would tell me of her own free will a long story in just a few words. When I got on the bus, still in Kiryat Yovel, she wasn't at all pleased at my sitting down next to her. Her reactions were abrupt. She moved the basket from her lap to the window side, immediately making an imaginary space between her and me: Let no sleeve touch a sleeve, no trouser leg touch her long skirt. A golden toenail peeked out from the sandal on the foot closest to me.

I accepted my lot and out of laziness didn't look for another seat. At the next stop it was already too late to change my mind. The bus filled up with passengers who

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were jammed along the aisle and on the steps. A female soldier who didn't pay attention to the driver's warning to watch out for the door managed to push herself in, but her bag got caught outside the closed door. It flapped in the wind, hitting the hinge of the transparent door. The passengers standing close to her sympathized with her distress. The driver should open the door! A tall guy with a ponytail, who also pushed himself in, actually praised the driver for not getting excited by the calls. In his opinion it was about time citizens, including soldiers, learned to obey rules.

The woman next to me remained outside this commotion. Nearly frozen, she didn't react when the door opened slightly and the bag was pulled in. And she didn't react when the ponytailed guy suddenly stopped praising the driver and started condemning him. A motorcyclist cut in front of the bus, which stopped suddenly. The standing passengers bumped into one another. Even those who were seated were jolted. The tall guy hit his head. Now he was angry not only at the driver but also at the government. His anger lasted several stops and did not subside even when the bus stopped at the Agron and Queen Shlomzion intersection. In the front window a large billboard

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announced the construction of a new neighborhood: the City of David.

Throughout this time the woman next to me didn't show any change. Under a thin layer of frost she guarded her silence and the imaginary space between us, even though it too suffered a jolt. I was touched by her silence and decided to listen to it when she too was startled, as if by a sudden stop. She called out toward the other bus that stood alongside ours at the traffic light:

“Aliza! Aliza! Why didn't you come to the funeral?”

Aliza was sitting in the front seat closest to the door, and her window was parallel to ours. Outside, the mirrors of the two buses nearly touched one another. The soldier had by now moved further into the bus, but the tall guy remained standing near the driver. He bent slightly, trying to see this Aliza who hadn't been at the funeral. A tower-shaped earring dangled from Aliza's right ear along her neck, reflecting in the mirror of our bus.

“Carmella?! Carmella?! How was it there?” Aliza's voice rang out above the noises of the intersection. Two of her fingers were playing with the earring, and she turned her ear to listen to the details while the stoplight remained red.

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I too turned my ear. Even though the red light was threatening to change, I had no doubt Carmella would overcome it and tell all. I once met a man who, between the red and green, told me his whole life story. This time, though, I was wrong. In vain did Carmella fill up with desire to tell Aliza all. By the time she raised a leg, moved the basket, and brought her mouth closer to the window, the light changed and the other bus hurried off passing us by.

When our bus moved on, Carmella noticed me and considered from the corner of her eye whether it was worth her while to tell me what Aliza wanted to know. She didn't have anyone else. Even the tall guy was already deeper in the bus.

Aliza disappeared, I thought to myself, but the desire to tell was still there, and the story wasn't lost. Carmella would tell. Now, even time worked in her favor. There was no red light threat, and there was still a long way to go. Ahead of us was King David Street, the Bell Park, Emeck Refaim. And when these disappeared behind us, I pinned my hopes on Derech Hebron. But before we saw Cleopatra Restaurant at the Ein Gedi intersection, Carmella pressed the stop button.

A sleeve touched a sleeve, a trouser leg touched a skirt,

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and my hopes vanished. I stood up to let her pass, and was sorry for Aliza who was gone and the story that was lost. Carmella waited for the door to open, and descending the steps, she looked back at me, the gold of the toenail twinkled in her eyes, and in six soft words she described the funeral Aliza didn't attend:

“It was not like his wedding.”