

MIRYAM SIVAN

Traffic¹

“**T**HERE ARE PLACES IN THE WORLD WHERE A WOMAN ALONE on a street experiences rape just because she is alone on a street. Like a dropped bill or coin, belonging to no-one, free to be pocketed, a woman alone on a street.”

Silence.

84

“What’s rape, mommy?”

The precocious six-year-old reader in the back seat of the car just picked up your book and opened to a random page. She likes to show off her increasing skills. And she’s good, been reading since age four. You glance at her in the rearview mirror hoping the question goes away. You slow down. Maybe a bird in a tree will distract her. Or a cat on a stone wall. Your foot rides the gas pedal gently.

“Mommy, what’s rape?”

•••

It’s the season of heartbreak when calves are separated from their mothers. You lie in bed reading, a glass of sage and lemon verbena tea on the table beside you. The cow in the ravine below bellows ‘cause her baby’s gone. She can’t understand why and why her bursting udders are being manhandled when she yearns to feel the gentle pink pull of her calf’s mouth.

She doesn’t know, and this is good, that her calf is in a village thirty minutes away by truck. That he mews for her as well and has just been fed fresh clover and hay and has solid shelter. He is a fine specimen and the man who bought him has no doubt he’ll become a fine bull. He’ll breed him for a couple of years and then sell him to the butcher, fat and worth a good sum.

You close the reading light, put soft foam plugs in your ears, draw a dark silk mask over your eyes, and turn away from the window.

•••

In the verdant ravine below your house, there are olive trees, oak trees, juniper bushes, wild

¹ All these comings and goings are true.

/AN

fic¹

D WHERE A WOMAN ALONE
use she is alone on a street. Like a
one, free to be pocketed, a woman

the car just picked up your book
increasing skills. And she's good,
view mirror hoping the question
tract her. Or a cat on a stone wall.

d from their mothers. You lie in
the table beside you. The cow in
n't understand why and why her
to feel the gentle pink pull of her

llage thirty minutes away by truck.
over and hay and has solid shelter.
no doubt he'll become a fine bull.
the butcher, fat and worth a good

ears, draw a dark silk mask over

ees, oak trees, juniper bushes, wild



thyme, and ferns. Last week a woman was murdered there. Her brother stabbed her in front of her two-year-old daughter, then placed her inside a car and torched it. You saw the smoke and didn't call the fire department. You thought someone was burning leaves or garbage.

The man left the child behind when he ran up the hill. Another man walking his dog approached the fire and saw a little girl toddling by herself among the trees. He called the fire department. He lifted the child in his arms and brought her to his wife. He called the police.

Why did the brother kill his sister? Neighbours say she fought to get a driver's license. That she took the car and didn't answer her phone for an entire afternoon. That she was seen talking to a man in the neighbouring village.

Why did the brother leave the child alone in the ravine? She was female.

••••

Ms. Trey kills rapists and abusive husbands when she has indisputable evidence of violence. Women send her their stories to a post office box in southern New Mexico. Ms. Trey checks thoroughly. Hospital records. Police reports. House calls. Even surveillance. Even spies.

Sometimes she feels the need to interview the men herself before the final plan is drawn up. Many of them claim the beatings are a crime of passion. They need to brand their love on their women's skin and bones. They feel driven to lay hands on them.

Ms. Trey is very careful to make the murders look like accidents. Food poisonings, a brake job in the desert, sometimes a body left in a field with signs of violence that point to crime families. She does this to keep the police away from her women, but also to cover her own tracks in case a woman has regrets. Though this has yet to happen.

When Ms. Trey was five, her mother was killed by her boyfriend. He was jealous of the young assistant in the real estate office where she worked. The courts called it a crime of passion and the murderer spent four years in prison. Ms. Trey lived with her grandmother who talked about correcting the scales of injustice. They plotted and schemed for a few years, but then the murderer drove drunk and swerved into oncoming traffic. He French-kissed a tractor trailer whose driver was also killed.

Did the courts also consider that a crime of passion, Ms. Trey wants to know, and rearranges her magenta scarf from India? She is part of an emerging international network of women who are not going to take it anymore.

••••

The white slave trade is lively and profitable in the Holy Land, your new friend from Experimental Psychology tells you. She knows. She's a prostitute. Easier money and less time consuming than waitressing. And she needs lots of time to keep up her grades. Hebrew is not her native tongue and university studies are not simple for her. Not at all.

She tells you she is totally free to see who she wants, when she wants, because she's a citizen. She did all the prep work in Buenos Aires. Her file with her identity card and with the delineation of her rights was handed to her in a special room for new immigrants at Tel Aviv airport upon arrival. But she has friends who are not so lucky. They, she lowers her voice on the campus green, are slaves. No mobility, no pay, no identity cards or rights.

All kinds of men visit prostitutes, she answers your stream of questions patiently. A lot of ultra-Orthodox men too. For example, on the first Wednesday morning of every month, a certain rabbi comes to her. He undresses neatly, lays his *tzitzit* carefully alongside his *kippa* and hat. She likes him. He doesn't talk much, orgasms quickly, and the only game he likes to play is spit and yell at the *goya* right before he runs out the door. She doesn't have the heart to tell him she's a Jew.

••••

In 1979, when Oriana Fallaci interviewed the Ayatollah Khomeini in Qum, she wore a black chador, part of the landscape of revolutionary Iran. She asked him about women's rights and wanted to know if it were true that women had to go into the sea in their black robes.

"Our customs are none of your business," Khomeini answered. "If you do not like Islamic dress, you're not obliged to wear it because Islamic dress is for good and proper young women."

"That's very kind of you," said Fallaci. "And since you said so, I'm going to take off this stupid, medieval rag right now." And she tore the chador off.

er brother stabbed her in front of
rched it. You saw the smoke and
ing leaves or garbage.
iother man walking his dog ap-
ong the trees. He called the fire
o his wife. He called the police.
ght to get a driver's license. That
noon. That she was seen talking

e was female.

disputable evidence of violence.
1 New Mexico. Ms. Trey checks
1 surveillance. Even spies.

efore the final plan is drawn up.
eed to brand their love on their
n.

dents. Food poisonings, a brake
of violence that point to crime
men, but also to cover her own
pen.

oyfriend. He was jealous of the
e courts called it a crime of pas-
ved with her grandmother who
nd schemed for a few years, but
affic. He French-kissed a tractor

y wants to know, and rearranges
ational network of women who

and, your new friend from Ex-
te. Easier money and less time
ep up her grades. Hebrew is not
Not at all.

1 she wants, because she's a cit-
her identity card and with the
for new immigrants at Tel Aviv
7. They, she lowers her voice on
cards or rights.

f questions patiently. A lot of ul-
orning of every month, a certain
alongside his *kippa* and hat. She
game he likes to play is spit and
e the heart to tell him she's a Jew.

meni in Qum, she wore a black
him about women's rights and
sea in their black robes.

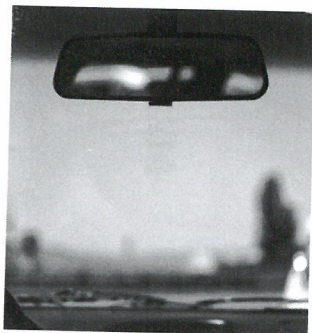
red. "If you do not like Islamic
ood and proper young women."
o, I'm going to take off this stu-

That ended the interview, though Khomeini did agree to see her again the next day. And she arrived with her chestnut straight hair uncovered and wore pants and a typical western top with a collar and buttons down the front. The gods did not fall off their chairs in heaven, and the men in the room did not break out in a sexual frenzy. In fact, Khomeini's son, Ahmad, told Fallaci that his father had laughed the day before, after her little stunt. It was the only time in his life he saw his father laugh.

••••

Now, because a woman had her neck slit like a goat before she was burned in a car, the women in the Bedouin village don't venture into the ravine anymore. They stay in each other's homes or walk the village streets in pairs or small groups. The woods have become a no-woman's land. You wonder if the men in the village are upset by this shrinking frame.

And you from the Jewish side of the ravine – you in fact from the land of the free and home



**He undresses
neatly, lays his
tzitzit carefully
alongside his
kippa and hat**

•••••

of the brave, specifically New York City – would have never considered walking in the ravine alone anyway. You learned about the international curfew on females in grammar school. No going to the bathroom alone. No going into a lonely stairwell alone. No going anywhere in the dark alone.

You've always walked in the beautiful ravine with another person. And with your very big dog.

••••

Over tea in a London hotel lobby, a religious woman from Israel – a computer programmer at a professional conference – talks about rape to a non-Jewish Finnish chip designer she just met.

"I've never talked about it before," the programmer says.

"You don't have to now, but it's good to," the chip designer responds softly.

"He died last week. So it feels okay. To talk. To you, I mean. Right now, just to you."

The Finnish woman pours them some more tea.

"My uncle raped me when I was 14."

Silence.

"He hit me in the stomach and slapped my face. He knew my family was at a wedding and that I had stayed home sick with flu."

"Only that one time?"

"Yes, but he told me if I didn't sleep with him again, he'd tell everyone I wasn't virgin because of an affair with a neighbour."

"What a monster."

"But something in me snapped and I wasn't afraid. I told him that I would describe his penis to my father if he didn't start pretending that I didn't exist. That I didn't want to hear a word of his or feel a glance of his my way." She takes out her phone and checks for recent incomings. "If they knew in my community, it would have destroyed my chances of getting married, and those of my sisters too. Forever."

"You're very strong," the chip designer says.

"No I'm not. I was killed. Rape murders sex and love and touch and intimacy and pleasure." The programmer adds two sugars and some cream to her tea.

••••

It made it to the papers but still you can't believe it. A rabbi, someone you once knew – whose house you used to eat at on Friday nights, who was a ritual witness to your now-defunct marriage, who runs a large yeshiva for young Jews making their way back into the fold – accused of pimping and licentious blackmail.

Breach of fiduciary duty, you read in the article. Sex with him – and with other rabbis – is the price a specific woman is charged to continue her conversion to Judaism. And she agrees

to literal sex with him, and some phone sex with a few of the other old guys, because she really wants to become a Jew.

You know Solomon way back when already said there's nothing new under the sun, but still this kind of thing gets to you.

Especially the wagon circling. Only a few months after the scandal breaks, all the big rabbis of the community come to the accused rabbi's son's wedding. They stand with him. They will not let a few peculiar moments of sex with a *goya* sully his good name.

••••

Beersheva is far enough away from the Galilee for some women to visit a female doctor with a specialty in hymenoplasty. You give the doctor's name to a woman you know from the gym. She confides in you because you also know her older sister from the university. You are discreet. She explains that she had sex with her boyfriend because they planned on getting married when they finished their university degrees. But after three years of love, friendship, and regular sex, he changed his mind. They were twenty-one.

He travelled abroad for a few months, came back to the village, and started working in his uncle's insurance office. Then he became engaged to a virgin.

She finished her degree and didn't go out for two years. But ever since she visited the doctor in Beersheva, she's allowed herself to meet men from the area. But no one gets serious. There's a buzz that something's wrong with her. Three years with a man and no wedding?

She tells her parents she's sick of these Arab men. How dare they judge her based on nothing but village gossip. Her father tells her to shut up. Only whores challenge men like this. Maybe they know something after all.

She says she's tired of being subjected to male views, male expectations, and male appetites. Her mother tells her to shut up. She needs to know her place or she'll end up a barren old maid. She should not have been allowed to get a degree.

She runs into her room and slams the door. She looks around. She is twenty-four years old and lives in ten square meters with posters of American and British bands on the walls, a few books on a shelf, a clothes closet, a window facing an orchard, and a charging cell phone on the floor.

••••

All the children in town know her as the whore of Tivon. And they also know her story. Her son had a breakdown in his tank as it pushed north towards Beirut. He spent the next five years in a psychiatric hospital and has barely left the house since returning home. He receives disability and has to be forced every few days to shower and change his clothes. Her husband was in Lebanon at the same time as their son. He soldiered on like the rest of his platoon. When he returned home, he walked in the front door, and then out the back. I'm going to buy cigarettes, the neighbour heard him say. He never came back. A high school buddy from Tivon saw him in South America, or maybe it was North.

At 67 the whore of Tivon is still going strong. Muscles are in shape. Hormone pills and make-up fill the clefts of time. And the men, of course, they keep coming. Jews, Arabs, old, young, bold, shy, horny. She flags them down at the bus stop outside of town, or near the bank in the center, and sometimes even at the corner by her house.

The children in the school bus point when they pass her waiting for a client. They laugh at her dyed blond hair that's always messy, her short shorts and tight tights, her stiletto heels. Her bright red lipstick is smeared on the wrinkly skin around her lips. Her eyes are outlined thickly in black kohl. She thrusts her hip out at passing cars and pretends not to see the jeering children.

••••

There are religious Jewish neighbourhoods in the cities and towns of Israel where sidewalks



**The child has
radar for shadows.
There will be
more questions**

•••••

old guys, because she really
new under the sun, but still
dal breaks, all the big rabbis
y stand with him. They will
ame.

en to visit a female doctor
woman you know from the
from the university. You are



**The child has
radar for shadows.
There will be
more questions**



needs to know her place or
to get a degree.
is twenty-four years old and
ds on the walls, a few books
ing cell phone on the floor.

ey also know her story. Her
He spent the next five years
ing home. He receives dis-
is clothes. Her husband was
est of his platoon. When he
I'm going to buy cigarettes,
buddy from Tivon saw him

shape. Hormone pills and
coming. Jews, Arabs, old,
le of town, or near the bank

g for a client. They laugh at
ights, her stiletto heels. Her
er eyes are outlined thickly
t to see the jeering children.

is of Israel where sidewalks

are segregated by sex. Signs direct men to one side of the street, women to the other. This practice has been challenged in court, declared unlawful, but once in a blue moon, it's enforced. Maybe less than that.

Did you know that it's illegal to kiss in public in some countries in the world?

In Israel it's not illegal, but in those same communities where signs on the street indicate which side men, and which women, you'd basically be taking your life into your hands to kiss in public there. Especially since it would have to be in the middle of the street where everyone could see. Those signs, by the way, also instruct women to keep walking. They are prohibited to idle in small groups and talk. That's the exact wording. In Hebrew. You can look it up on the internet. Under Images.

This country proudly exhibits its loathing of women. A media star pedophile claims he didn't know the child's body he fucked for weeks was actually under sixteen years of age and charges are dropped. What do people want from him! He didn't know!

And in the Arab community honour killings are par for the course. The police get a little more excited about these murders than they do about the segregated sidewalks. Raped women are sometimes killed by their brothers. Family honour apparently is cleaned by disposing of the "contaminated" female body. Or sometimes raped women are forced to marry their rapists to eliminate the stain of this shameful crime. This kind of thing has been making international news lately. But it's not new news, folks. Check out Deuteronomy 22:28-29: "If a man is caught in the act of raping a young woman who is not engaged, he must pay fifty pieces of silver to her father. Then he must marry the young woman because he violated her, and he will never be allowed to divorce her."

And what happens if she's engaged? And if he's not caught? No damages paid for spoiled goods?



A few Jewish women's organisations have gotten their knickers in a twist over mixed-couples in Israel. Apparently the rate is rising. Mostly Jewish women and Arab men. The organisations campaign to raise awareness. They have flyers and posters and websites. They tell soldiers to be aware that while they are on the battlefields, war rages at home. They post names of Jewish women with non-Jewish boyfriends and husbands. They have the support of the government since it agrees that a Jewish woman's body is national property, an extension of the war of primary rights being waged on the Land. Never forget. Never forgive. No more Sarahs in Pharaoh's bed. Some of the organisations' marketing slogans:

A Jewish woman whose child has an Arab father violates her nation's honor.

Stop the sexual terror attacks on the daughters of Israel.

Do you know a young woman who is in, or is thinking of, a relationship with a goy?

Arab! Don't even dare to think about a Jewish woman!



"Therefore we will note that on the night of Jacob's death, he blessed Joseph 'with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that coucheth beneath, blessings of the breasts, and of the womb.' Genesis 49:25."

Now your little girl reads out loud in Hebrew. Since she's a native speaker, she reads better than she did in English, though because this is Biblical Hebrew, she stumbles over the difficult words. But what a passage to open to randomly. The child has radar for the shadows. There will be more questions no doubt.

You pull into the driveway and see the dog wagging his tail wildly by the gate. He's been waiting all day for the two of you to return home.

"What's a womb, Mommy?"

"The room in a woman's body where her baby grows."

"It's a funny word." She stares out the car window at the dog.

"It's linked to the word compassion. *Rehem*, for womb. *Rachamim*, compassion. C'mon let's go home."

"*Rachamim*," the six-year-old girl repeats slowly, and you catch each other's eyes in the rear-view mirror. **JQ**