

M A R C L E V Y

Klinic am Zurichberg

We recline on the bed in our little cubicle room, Karla and me, volunteer workers on a seaside kibbutz. We've worked long and hard; it's time to rest. Sometimes she speaks in her sleep. This afternoon, when she wakes we abandon ourselves to love making while Gerard the Frenchman pounds the flimsy screen door.

"Open!" he cries, "I must have my radio. Open! Open it!" *Bang. Bang. Bang.*

In our love play we do not hear his desperate shouts, his thudding fists. After a time we tremble and shake, lose ourselves in a tangle of dreams.

Work: Early each morning a dozen volunteers douse the kerosene heaters in their tumble down shacks, dress, wash up, trudge to the eating hall to dine on toast, cereal, fruit juice and cheese.

At precisely 5:30 am we board the tractor pulled trolley, which takes us to far away fields.

From 6am to 2pm we work beneath the harsh sun. In the peanut fields row upon row of flat leafy clusters hug the earth. We form two lines five yards apart; walking forward slowly, each volunteer thrusts the curved pitchfork under a dry clump, lifts, twirls, flips it over moist side up. At noon, when the kibbutznik in charge shouts, "Break time!" our tools clatter to the earth. Gathering in a semi-circle, we flick dirt off our arms, wipe dust from our eyes, eat crackers, slug back precious water. Then return to work.

In the orange groves, wearing burlap sacks and canvass belts that loop our shoulders we climb wood ladders braced against stubborn trees, pull, twist, pluck the ripe fruit, drop it into the sack, reach for another. When the fifty pound sack

is full one must descend the ladder and awkwardly trudge to a large wood box, upend the bag, carefully empty out the harvest. The work is boring. Tedious. Backbreaking. But no one talks. Sometimes we pelt each other with oranges, pelt the wood pallet, waste hundreds of dollars of the pulpy fruit. Or peel the skin to suck and chew the luscious pulp.

The thick skinned avocados are snipped with long wood stemmed shears. It's a tiresome task but the sheltering groves are a welcome respite from the glaring sun.

Monthly, the cow sheds need cleaning. Armed with shovels and brooms we scrape, sweep, scrub and hose the cement sheds down, shrug off the stench. When no one is looking, the affable Sammy the Argentine charges up the side of a white painted wall, somersaults in mid-air, lands on his feet. "You try," he says, with a confident grin. But I don't try and thankfully he does not ask the reason.

Worst are the ten thousand chickens inside the long low lit hut the size of an airplane hanger. At 2am, ten volunteers don thick canvass gloves and cheap cotton masks. Chicken Woman demonstrates: walk slowly amongst the sleepy birds; bend slowly forward, quickly scoop two in the right hand, two in the left. Now walk to a narrow doorway where kibbutzniks will grab and shove the squawking birds into plastic cages they stack on trucks.

"You make like that," she says, flicking at feathers that cling to her face. And it's true: she looks like a chicken.

As the hours pass, as the flock thins out, when panicked birds claw and bite I punch their heads with my canvass fists. Instantly they droop dead. The volunteers grumble amongst themselves but I hear them.

"In the orange groves he threw too hard. Now this. Why does he do that? Someone should make him stop."

Michael from Switzerland yells, "Please! Treat the animals with care!"

Has it been that long? Six months ago Michael introduced me to Karla. He'd seen me watching her. But what does he know of war nightmares and crying for no reason? Or the startle reflex where sudden sounds cause me to suddenly turn to the left or right. Or the sorrow that haunts my every step, or the fear and rage not far beneath it? Still, except for stocky muscular Bella, who wants petite and long haired Karla back, we volunteers get along well.

At the dining hall, having washed up, volunteers and kibbutznicks lunch on fresh caught fish, bowls of salad, trays of vegetables, loaves of fresh bread, platters of homemade cake.

Afterward, in bathing suits, the volunteers march a half mile down a dry dirt road to a long narrow pebbled beach.

I spread a large blue towel onto the glistening sand.

“Come closer, Karla.”

“Like this?”

“Yes, Karla. Like that.”

I wrap myself around her. Who cares what the others think.

“Hold me, Karla. Just hold me.”

She never questions my behavior. We are a happy pair.

One night in our cubicle room Karla plucks a rock from beneath the pillow.

“Your dog is dead!” she cries, then leaps from the bed and bolts from the room and runs away into the pitch black night. I chase after her, grab her arm seconds before a speeding truck turns the bend on the blacktop road that leads to Netanya. In the morning Karla is taken away.

“To a hospital,” says the kibbutz nurse, a middle aged woman with black hair and black eyes and lipstick much too red. “Don’t worry. They will take good care of her until she goes home.”

Twice a week there is the long miserable bus ride to a desolate town where the same armed guard asks the dismal question, “My I see your passport, please?”

Automatically I flash the blue booklet. On cue he points to the decrepit cinder block building surrounded by a ten foot high chain link fence. The windows are barred with thick steel grates.

“Thank you. Good afternoon,” he says, handing the document back.

There is the eternal waiting for hurried footsteps, the swift metallic song of the iron key inserted into the ancient padlock, the lazy creak of the heavy door as it slowly opens then thunders shut.

“Shalom,” says the orderly, a pleasant bearded man dressed in white who ushers me through a damp hallway which opens onto a tiny brick plaza lit by a single bulb.

Like clockwork, a crowd of women rush forward to fervently pat their butterfly hands on the top of my head. Karla, heavily drugged, leans against a far wall, barely able to speak.

“Of course she is medicated. Haven’t you read ‘I Never Promised You a Rose Garden?’ asks the kibbutz nurse. “Why do you go there?”

“Because I love her.”

A month later, the medication reduced, we are permitted to walk the hospital grounds.

“Soon I go home,” says Karla, smiling for the first time in weeks.

Back on the ward, the orderly leads us through a corridor to a series of small private rooms. He unlocks a metal door, signals twenty minutes by flashing his fingers, then locks the door behind us.

Instantly, we doff our shoes and throw ourselves onto the lumpy bed. Three women, peering at us through the doors round window, make obscene gestures. At the sight of my fist they scatter like crows.

“Karla, will you marry me? I’ll come to Switzerland.”

She closes her eyes. It’s so quiet in this room. So dreadfully quiet. Like the secret seconds before a well sprung ambush. Or the dying hush that follows it. Red. Everywhere red.

“Yes! I’ll marry you!”

The war is seven years past but the flight to Zurich is marred by thoughts of jungle and ambush and monsoon patrols. Why now? Why? Karla is waiting. My dear, dear Karla. Even the secret blue pills taken each day to quiet me do not help. Not two, not three, not four of them. There is nothing to do but hunker down, wait until it passes. I’ve done that many times.

After Customs in Zurich, after the immaculate Dolderban’s graceful chugging ascent, after I exit the car, lost in the peace of Zurichberg, a policeman points the way.

“Danke.”

“Bitte,” he says, touching the tip of his cap.

And I’m off.

A curtain of ivy hugs the red brick walls of the elegant three storey psychiatric center.

“Guten morgen,” says Frau Essler, a plump fastidious woman who directs me upstairs to the office of Dr. Schmidt, a handsome man seated behind a large black desk.

“So, you are here to visit Karla?” he asks.

“Yes, but...”

Dr. Schmidt jots down notes on a pad. From time to time he asks questions.

When I’ve finished talking, finished weeping, he asks, “Perhaps you too should like to stay for a while?”

I accept. He confiscates the Valium.

Frau Essler leads the way to a cozy carpeted room with brass lamps, a private phone, a sizable bed draped by a thick down blanket. She opens the bathroom door. The deep square porcelain tub has gleaming brass fixtures; the floor is polished marble.

“It is good, yes?”

“Yes. It’s beautiful.”

That evening I’m given a drug which makes me whole. Five days later I’m allowed to meet Karla. She is lucid, bright, cheerful.

After the long embrace Karla says, “You have no need to explain.”

But what of the dream of the dog, the running away, the time spent on the grim locked ward? Why is she now in Klinik am Zurichberg? Or does it matter? Karla is better, I love her and it’s safe here. We’re together and safe.

At breakfast, lunch and supper we sit side by side in the cozy white walled dining room where Klinik staff and patients eat meals prepared by a chef wearing apron and toque. The long tables are set with linen, glassware, antique silver. We patients have napkin holders that bear our names. The mood is carefree and festive though if Martin the Dutch schizophrenic jumps up to spin in circles, a staff member will gently sit him down.

Here, there is no locked ward, there is no armed guard, no need to over medicate. Each passing day Karla seems more herself.

“We shall get married, yes?”

“Of course, my love. We’ll get married soon.”

Across from us sits Alex, son of the president of Arrow Shirts. A tall gaunt man, a permanent slap pressed to his angular face, he is keen to talk about anything.

“Politics. Sports. International affairs. Whatever you wish I shall gladly discuss.”

Alex says Karla and I make a splendid pair.

“You really are, you know. Splendid.”

I’m prompted to lend Alex a gift bestowed by the Argentine who somersaulted in the cow shed.

“You American’s are funny people,” Sammy had said.

There is still dust on the pages from the peanut fields.

“Good story,” said Alex, the following day, “have you got any more?”

That evening I met Joshua, a studious curly-headed man from Spain.

“We’ll begin therapy tomorrow. One hour, three times a week,” he said, answering my question.

Karla gently taps my shoulder and points to Frau Hannah, who works in the atelier on the third floor. She is slim and fashionable and wears a red ribbon in her fiery pulled back hair.

“Do you like to paint?” she asks.

We’re interrupted by Robby, the burly Israeli vet given to flexing his muscles and punching his palm with his hammer like fists.

“Thank you, Chef, for this wonderful meal!” he shouts at the top of his lungs.

Everyone claps until the chef waves to us from the kitchen. After the food arrives, after Robby offers a second boisterous thanks, after the clatter of silverware, we begin to eat.

Between bites Frau Hannah says, “I can make an appointment for Thursday if that’s alright.”

“Yes, thanks.”

I’ve done many things but never painted before. How can that help?

In Joshua’s sun lit office, a comfortable forest of hundreds of books and potted plants, we sit and talk. After a time Joshua says dreams are the voice of the unconscious.

“Every morning, before you forget, write them down.”

I dream of ordinary events. “Small dreams” the Jungian’s call them. Necessary to reach the archetypal.

Two days later I read to Joshua the first entry.

“Cowboys and Indians are fighting a desperate battle. One cowboy has six arrows in his back. When the dream ends the credits roll. The main actor is Redman. All the cowboys are named Redman.”

Joshua asks, “Any thoughts about that?”

I look out the window. A light snow is falling on the roof tops, on the people of Zurichberg.

“In Vietnam I knew a red haired man who was shot six times. We called him Red. He died.”

After the tumbling tears, after the deep deep sobs, after Joshua says, “There’s really nothing for me to say,” the session ends.

I lasted two months: Psychotherapy. Art therapy. Locked door liaisons with Karla in my carpeted room the Klinik staff politely ignored. Then the money ran out and Karla relapsed and we broke up.

“You are a bad man,” she said. “A very bad man.”

It was 1977, the beginning of a very long affair.

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