

# Lizard of Masada

*Israel by bus*

Gary Zebrun

In December before the millennium, I was in Birmingham, England, on the couch in the row house of my boyfriend's parents. It was Sunday morning a week before Christmas, and his father, who had a hip replaced months before, shuffled over and handed me a cup of milky tea. His mother, her head wavering now and then like a bobble doll's, sat next to me reading an *Ellery Queen* magazine.

Andrew was cross-legged on the floor in his boxers and a sleeveless *Mama Mia* T-shirt, hunching forward to read the newspaper. His left foot, short and squat, stuck out from under him.

"Israel," he said.

"Who's ill?" his father asked.

"No, *Israel*. Gary, let's go."

Always looking for a bargain, he was studying the *Guardian's* travel section for our next vacation. The Mideast—that surprised me

"Airfare, three-star hotels, breakfasts and dinners, coach tours of Jerusalem, Galilee, the Dead Sea, Masada. Seven hundred pounds inclusive," he read from the newspaper ad. "Brilliant."

*Coach tours? You've got to be kidding*, I thought.

"You can get blown up in Israel," his mother said.

"There she goes," he said. "Everything is a disaster. Mum, cheer up."

She looked at me and shook her head. I wanted to believe she was thinking, *I feel sorry for you*.

His father said, "Leave the boys be."

**We were in our late forties. We'd met three years earlier, in** October, at the A-House bar in Provincetown. Late in coming out, I'd never had a boyfriend before. He had several. He told me that he believed men were *controlling* (he should know), so none of the guys lasted. Looking back, I should have known I wasn't going to be any different. But an ocean between us and the chance to see each

other six or seven times a year provided the proper English distance that suited him. And at the time six or seven encounters a year were enough to make me pretend that I had, at least, finally someone to call *boyfriend*.

Andrew made all the arrangements for Israel. He booked a night for us in London the day before our flight to Tel Aviv at the Noel Coward B&B in Belgravia.

"You know who Noel Coward is, don't you?" he had asked.

"You think I'm stupid," I said.

He didn't answer.

Andrew told me we were spending five nights in Bethlehem. "It's the center of the tour," he said.

I'd spent a lifetime driving myself away from Christ and now my boyfriend was taking me to the Holy Land. I hummed Coward's "There's Always Something Fishy About the French" and wondered why we weren't going to Paris instead.

A penny-pincher, unlike me, my Birmingham guy booked a small room with a shared bath down the hall. It was February, dry and colder than usual for London. The radiator hissed and the room filled with nosebleed air. He was dressed to go out.

"I'm tired," I said. "Not very hungry."

It was two in the morning Providence time.

"I've got to eat," he said.

Through dinner and at the bar Halfway to Heaven near Trafalgar Square we talked about his cranky boss at the Department of Constitutional Affairs. Andrew was a solicitor, a bureaucrat, who saw justice and democracy as lifeless abstractions. I was surprised to hear him talk, with uncharacteristic animation, about Israel: the Dome of the Rock and Western Wall, Dead Sea scrolls and mass suicide at Masada. I reached over and took his hand, but he gave me his managerial look of disapproval.

Suddenly, I wanted to ask, *Why are we together?*

But before I could find the courage, he said, "Okay, let's go."

**A man with a basketful of red Cook Tour travel bags greeted us** when we queued up at the El Al check-in at Heathrow. He found our names on a list and gave us each a bag. Andrew looked disappointed. He hated red. The agency representative told us we were among four travelers in the group who were not born-again Episcopalians from a church in Chester. My boyfriend laughed. All I could do was roll my eyes and mutter, *Born-again Episcopalians?*

"Did you know about the pilgrims?" I asked.

He shook his head, though I wondered whether he was lying.

We hadn't noticed the ticket agent, a pretty Israeli with curly red hair, waving us to the counter. Finally, a guy in line behind us, who wasn't on the tour, poked me and said, "What are you waiting for? The Second Coming?"

Andrew looked away. He was an exemplary British bureaucrat: With strangers and people above his status, he was exactly deferential, even sometimes timid, but with people he oversaw—boyfriends, parents, workers—he took charge, and sometimes bullied.

"Hurry up," he said.

The ticket agent looked at our passports—one British, the other American—and said, "You're not related."

Andrew scratched at his neck.

"You'll have to step away," she told me.

Two handsome men, both twenty-something, appeared.

"Who's Mr. Zebrun?" one guy, smiling, asked.

"Me."

He took my passport and said, "This way."

By now Andrew had begun to sweat; a wet patch migrated across his shirt just below the neck.

"Why?" I asked.

"It's nothing," the guy said, not at all reassuring.

I looked back and saw my boyfriend pull up the handle of his carry-on and head off somewhere else with the other agent. He walked in tight, quick steps. He hadn't said a word.

*Jesus, I thought, they think we're trouble.*

In a room with only a long steel table and a single collapsible chair, my guy, joined by a woman agent, in her twenties too, became suddenly aggressive and battered me with questions: Why was I going to Israel? Why did I stop in London? When and where did I meet my friend? What did I write about at the newspaper in Providence? Had I ever met a Muslim in Birmingham? Why stay so long in Bethlehem?

“Why indeed,” I muttered, at the last one.

Sometimes, looking back on this scene at Heathrow now—years after September 11, I imagine Andrew sweating in a cinderblock airport room and telling his agent some insidious lie about my intentions for going to Israel and the agents whisking me off to some black site. *He would have done anything to save himself*, I’d think.

The interrogator had written down my answers and passed them to the woman who took them somewhere. I thought about citing my civil rights under international law but I decided a confrontation wouldn’t help. I pictured Andrew, who hated questions even more than most Englishmen, swimming in sweat.

“I guess you’ve got to be careful,” I said, trying to placate the agent.

He ignored me.

About a half hour later, he returned with someone wearing latex gloves. He hoisted my suitcase onto the table and the other guy opened it and checked everything, emptying it of my shirts and socks and boxers. He uncapped my toothpaste tube and mouthwash. He spilled out pills for heartburn and headaches and removed the batteries to my alarm clock and camera.

I could tell he wanted me to react, maybe argue with him, give him a reason that would allow him to keep me from boarding the flight, so I kept quiet.

After the search, the first agent said, “Okay, you can go to the gate now.”

“Where’s my friend?” I asked.

“How do I know?”

At the door, I looked back and asked about my ticket and passport.

“They’ll be at the gate,” he said, having long ago tired of me.

On the way, rolling my carry-on, I noticed it was plastered now with a Day-Glo green strip of tape and the words *INSPECTED*.

Andrew had reached the gate about a minute earlier.

“Fine,” he said, as if I were to blame. “We didn’t have time for a drink.”

“Aren’t you worried?” I asked. “They singled us out.”

“We’re two men on a vacation, what do you expect?”

That’s when I thought of turning around and heading out to Paris on my own, but someone called out our names.

“Come on,” he said.

Ever compliant, I trailed behind, retrieved my ticket and passport. We were the last to board. As we walked down the aisle, he smiled, as if nothing out of the ordinary had detained us. When he saw someone with a red tour bag, he nodded.

Seated, he fidgeted with the magazines in the pouch.

“Your shirt’s all sweaty,” I said.

He scowled, and opened the flight magazine to review the drink options.

“This isn’t a great start,” I said.

While the jet lifted off, I wondered, *What am I doing here?*

**At Ben Gurion Airport, about thirty of us waited near a WELCOME TO ISRAEL sign for our guide.** His name was Aaron, an Israeli. We’d been sent his photograph. He was tall and thin with thick, wavy, whitish hair. He looked like he was in his fifties and could have been a boozy musician. The two other non-born-again, sisters from Wimbledon, Mary and Lucille, had spotted us as the compatriot heathens in the group but didn’t introduce themselves until we’d reached baggage claim.

Mary, fifteen years younger than her sister, had cranberry streaks in her jet-black hair and orange-rimmed sunglasses. She

said, "My sister wagered you weren't going to make it. I won."

Lucille glanced over to some of the others, all wearing the same olive cross on what looked like a black shoestring, and said, "I'm glad you did."

Aaron showed up. "We've got about an hour ride to Bethlehem," he said.

My boyfriend groaned.

Aaron noticed the green strip on our luggage and came over and said, "I see."

Everyone's attention was on us.

"Give me your passport," he said.

I fished it out.

"A yellow sticker," he said. "They'll be watching you. They're harmless—as long as you don't have anything to hide."

We arrived at our hotel, the Intercontinental, a little before midnight, and we four heathens headed to the bar. A few young Arab men inside wearing Nike and Puma T-shirts were sharing a shisha. The bartender put out a bowl of olives. We ordered gin and tonics.

He said, "You can tell you're English."

He flirted a little with Mary and left to get our drinks.

Mary ate an olive and said, "Delicious—right off the tree."

**I woke before my boyfriend and climbed the stairs to the hotel roof.** The sun was low enough to wash over a maze of buildings in Manger Square. The desert hillside behind Bethlehem was lit too, everything the color of cured hay. The air in the distance shimmered in the morning heat. The Church of the Nativity, boxlike, older than everything else, stood out, because on its flat rooftop rose, flamingo-like, an enormous tipsy star made of wire and white lights. Eventually, everything melded into the dawn—stunning and desolate.

Back in our room my boyfriend was up. "Where were you?" he asked.

"Wandering," I said.

He said, "We have fifteen minutes to make breakfast."

I thought about telling him that I wished he had seen Manger Square in the sunrise. I pictured being there on the roof and kissing him. Instead, I said, "You go, and I'll be right there."

Later that day, we toured Bethlehem. At some of the Christian sites, the born-again formed a circle holding hands while someone read a passage from the New Testament. The Wimbledon sisters and my boyfriend and I circled with them for the first prayer at David's Well: "Oh that one could give me water to drink at the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate." They were delighted, but their happiness was short-lived; later and throughout the journey we politely wandered off whenever the improbable Episcopalians coiled into prayer.

Manger Square was lined with bric-a-brac shops and a few restaurants that looked a little like the all-night Greek diners in Manhattan, all serving the same robust Arabic coffee with a hint of cardamom. We were the only tourists there in late morning. As soon as we arrived, storekeepers emerged from doorways and sang out "big sale" in perfect English. The shops sold olive-carved crèches, rosaries with wooden beads, crucifixes and crosses, some as large as stop signs. There were hundreds of hand-carved olive items—from peregrine eggs in cup holders to camel key chains. My boyfriend picked up a jar of holy water he thought of getting for his parents.

"The price is a bit dear for water," he said.

"You should haggle," I said.

The storeowner, handsome with dark skin and a stubby beard, smiled.

"You want a millennium keepsake?" he asked me.

He handed over "a 2000 pair" of bright red cardboard glasses with 3-D cellophane for lenses, at least ten times the size of ordinary glasses. "Thousands were supposed to come for New Year's. Maybe a couple hundred showed up. You can have it, free."

I picked out a carved olive egg and gave him five dollars. "Keep the change," I said.

His name was Jubran Hana. He said, "You come to my restaurant, Shepherds' Valley. I give you the best table for four." He handed me

a card and said, "Taxis know it."

Later that day, in Jerusalem, on the Via Dolorosa, an American with a terrier beard and filthy white polo shirt stopped a few of the born-again when he noticed their Bibles and said he was sorry for betraying Jesus. He said his name was Judas. Jerusalem Syndrome. Our guide Aaron explained that the malady usually passes in days; in rare cases, a Christian with intensely devout beliefs never returns to the world as he had known it. Some of the born-again looked sad enough to cry. The Wimbledon sisters giggled. Andrew frowned. *At least the guy feels something intensely*, I thought.

At the Twelfth Station, the Church of the Flagellation, I poked my boyfriend and whispered, "like the Vault in Provincetown." He gave me a look, and I thought, *Jesus, lighten up*.

Outside the walls of the Old City on Mount Zion we visited the Coenaculum, which is where the Virgin Mary lived and where Jesus met his apostles for the Last Supper. Andrew said, "Dingy place for a meal, isn't it?"

I laughed, then wandered off to an empty corner that opened into a view of the Mount of Olives and the Garden of Gethsemane and the leafy grayish canopies over the gnarled branches of olive trees. My boyfriend and the Wimbledon sisters followed.

Mary said, "They're praying again."

"The Judean desert. It's beautiful," I said.

"It's desolate," Andrew said.

"Do you think there are scorpions?" Mary asked.

"I hate snakes," Andrew said.

"A scorpion isn't a snake. It's an arachnid," I said.

I was surprised at how angry I sounded. He walked away.

"I think you embarrassed him," Lucille said. "Love is complicated."

I patted her on the shoulder, and said, "You're sweet."

On our last night in Bethlehem, before leaving for our coach ride through the Judean Hills to the Dead Sea and Galilee, we ate at the restaurant owned by the Arab merchant from Manger Square.

We told the taxi driver to take us to Shepherds' Valley and ended up winding through some of the same streets over and over; after circling Rachel's Tomb for the third time, Mary said, "I think he's lost or ripping us off."

"Quiet," Andrew whispered. "Let him drive."

But either the driver had been lost and found his way or he understood Mary and decided it would be prudent to drop us at the restaurant straight away. We got out and left my boyfriend to pay.

Jubran was surprised to see us and made a fuss so that the few other diners, all Arabs, would think we were celebrities. Our meal was unremarkable except for the olives. I'd had enough of chickpeas for a while. My boyfriend said the chicken tasted gamy, and he was right. He asked for a local beer and our host shook his head.

"There's one brewery in the West Bank and it has the blessing of Arafat. But the beer stinks."

A Christian Arab, he'd studied at Bethlehem University, which is run by the De La Salle Christian Brothers. He said he'd thought of becoming a priest, then looked at Mary, and winked.

Instead of beer, he brought us a carafe of wine that tasted like the sweet altar swill I drank as an altar boy. When we were done eating we ordered gin and tonics and lingered at the table until the restaurant closed. Jubran insisted on driving us to our hotel, but first wanted to tour the town. We stopped at the university. From the car on the way to the courtyard, Jubran and an Arab friend took each other's hand, as is the custom. Mary and Lucille walked arm and arm. There were enough stars in the sky to almost make you believe something amazing can happen after all. I reached for my Birmingham boyfriend's hand; he pulled away.

"Not on your life, buster," he said, smiling to make it seem like he was joking.

"It's the Arab way of brothers," I said.

"We aren't Arabs," he said.

Later that night, we had sex in our drab hotel room. My boyfriend was energetic.

When our eyes met, I thought I saw a flash of passion. Then I realized it was the light from the streetlamp striking his pupils.

**On the bus through the Judean Hills I sat by the window while Andrew caught up on government work.**

I read the heading on his paper: *EVEN THE INDIGENT HAVE RIGHTS AND DIGNITY*. It was the word *even* that made me wince.

"You'll miss the desert if you bury yourself in work all the way," I said. "Aaron said we'll be passing caves and some Bedouin camps. You might see falcons and eagles. If we're lucky we could catch a glimpse of a gazelle or an ibex, maybe even a leopard."

I didn't tell him there were probably only twenty or thirty leopards left in the Judean Hills, nor that, like the giant mountain goat, the leopard was primarily a nocturnal creature. More and more I'd been keeping information from him and telling him half-truths. I wasn't sure why, though now I realize that these concealments were my passive way of thinking I had some capacity to influence him. I turned to the window and fixed on the sand and stone, not a single piece of flora anywhere, and felt the raw power of barrenness.

"It's just an empty stretch," he said. "I'll see enough sand and dirt at Masada."

"Suit yourself," I said.

While the bus climbed the road bordered by Judean scree, its engine whined as if the coach itself was reluctant to journey through the desolate waste. I thought of Jim Crace's *Quarantine*, set in the very hills we ascended, about travelers who enter the desert to fast and pray and atone amid dusty lumps of dried leopard dung and scorpions with lobster claws. They meet instead a mad sadistic man and someone named Jesus who they heard could perform miracles, "a fugitive from pleasure, comfort, beauty, light."

It was easy to think life could be different as the bus climbed through the Judean hills, the narrow roads and hairpin turns, dust rising from the scree as we whirred past, sunlight now and then stinging the openings to caves. It was easy to think I wasn't really on

a bus with a boyfriend I didn't want to admit I'd never love.

We stopped once on the way to Masada, at a Bedouin trading camp on the hillside. Some of the Arabs were dressed in traditional desert robes, others in jeans and T-shirts; some wore sandals, others Nikes. All the women were veiled.

A boy approached and asked: "Mister, you want an evil-eye prayer bead?"

One arm was draped with the necklaces, and his other tugged at the tail of my shirt. He wasn't more than seven. Another boy, not much older, appeared, and Andrew, who'd been standing by the door of the bus, shouted, "Thieves."

His outburst stunned me. He rushed over and said, "The little Fagin was about to snatch your wallet."

Three Arab men intervened, and one of them, who turned out to be the first boy's father, stared down Andrew.

"Maybe I was wrong," my boyfriend said, his agitation turning to mush.

The man nodded and his son tugged at my shirt tail.

"You want the evil eye?" the boy asked.

I picked a strand of the beads from his arm and asked, "How much?"

"Only dollars. Two dollar," he said.

"One," I said.

Andrew had skulked back to the bus.

"One," the boy said.

"Deal," I said.

"Good. The evil eye protect you." Then looking at the bus, he said, "But not him."

While we pulled back onto the road, Andrew, as if he hadn't been intimidated, said, "You had to buy it. You're lucky I saw what was going on."

I ignored him, and ran the evil-eye beads through my fingers like a rosary.

**We arrived at Masada a couple of hours before dusk, in time to catch the last cable car of the day.** Its cliffs rise 450 meters, overlooking the Dead Sea on the east. Its top is a rhomboid mesa where Herod the Great built a refuge in case the conquered Jews revolted. In ancient times its only access was the treacherous Snake Path that the Romans could have easily defended. Within its fortress Herod had built a palace decorated with frescoes made to resemble marble; there had been storage for food and water cisterns that drained a nearby wadi during the essential rains that rarely fell. A few decades after Herod had left, a group of Jews, the Zealots from Jerusalem, fled to Masada for safety. It took three years for the Romans to build a rampart to the top and finally breach the inner walls of the fortress. But the night before they entered, the thousand Zealots made their stand on Masada and set fire to everything and drew lots for ten among them to kill the others. When that grim task was done, the ten took turns killing each other until only one was left to suffer the shame of suicide.

After Aaron had finished telling the story, Mary said loud enough for everyone in the cable car to hear, "That's stupid."

Some of the born-again agreed. My boyfriend diplomatically said it wasn't our place to judge. Someone said something about the gas chambers in the Nazi death camps. Some of the others nodded. Someone said, "Never again."

We toured the top of the mesa for about an hour. Its rooms, including three communal baths, had been built into the rock and now looked like an architectural model. I turned from the group and walked to the edge of the mesa. I was captivated by the dusk turning the incessant ochre of the sandstone landscape into a range of crisp blues, browns and red, crawling over Judea while a huge orange sun was setting. Aaron called out to everyone to hurry. The last cable car back would soon be boarding.

Andrew walked over and asked, "Didn't you hear?"

"The light," I said, not able to finish because I didn't know what I was feeling.

"It's nice. We have to go," my boyfriend said.

If I'd been attentive, I might have detected a slight concern, even tenderness, in his voice. For once he didn't chastise me. But I wasn't listening. I was absorbed in the desert dusk.

We were the last to board the cable car, which was crowded with all the born-again and the other stragglers who'd waited until the end of the day to leave the mesa.

"Move in," the cable operator from the back shouted. Andrew pushed deep into the pack while I stayed near the opening. Just as the cage of the car was closing, I slipped out. No one noticed. As the car descended into the sky away from the cliff, I hid behind a tall rock outcropping. Above me, a spider web tickled my skull. When the car had passed far enough from the plateau, I returned to the perch where I had seen the endless expanse of sand and stone hemorrhage with blue and orange and red. Now all that was left was a disappearing slice of pink off in the distance above the Dead Sea.

I sat against a rock and wondered whether it would grow so cold I'd shiver in the night. Across the sandy floor maybe ten feet away was a lizard, two feet long. As the light receded, it stared at me. Its bright orange dewlap throbbled. I could hear it breathe. There is no silence like a desert silence. I fished out my strand of evil-eye beads and fingered them, one by one. The lizard was patient. I thought, *I'd wait, too*; for what, I still didn't know.