

TRUTH OR DARE

Ménage à quatre en kibbutz

by JESSICA BERGER GROSS



I arrived in Tel Aviv in time for my twenty-first birthday, flying a circuitous route from Kathmandu through Dubai to London and then back to the Middle East after a college semester abroad in Nepal. I'd wanted to leave the suburban world of my childhood far behind, and purposefully chose destinations on the other side of the world.

At the airport I strapped on my overstuffed backpack and went to meet my childhood friend and Hebrew school classmate Stefanie. After catching up, Stefanie and I traveled north together towards green hills and orchards and the kibbutz where we'd arranged to spend the summer volunteering.

Out the bus window, and in bars and cafes, I saw them. Men—boys, really—my age and even younger, in uniform with guns slung like messenger bags over their shoulders. I was sexually inexperienced; I'd lost my virginity to my first boyfriend

at age 19, whom I'd callously broken up with in the fall of my junior year so that I could see the world—and discover what it was like to have sex with other men—but I hadn't so much as kissed someone during my time in Nepal. Now the tall, dark and handsome men of my imaginings—an irresistible contrast to the

funny-nerdy, hipster-brilliant, impossible-to-decode Woody Allen types I encountered at my liberal arts college—were here, within reach.

Stefanie and I got off at the bus station—the last stop—and hitchhiked over to the kibbutz.

Roger, the volunteer coordinator, greeted us in his office—a clean and orderly shack far from the members' living quarters—and handed us work clothes: blue shorts that we were to pair with white t-shirts or tank tops.

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"I'm signing you both up for the dining hall," Roger said, pointing to the work rotation sheet posted on the wall.

"Is there any way I can work outside?" I asked. I'd pictured myself in the fields.

"Start here," Roger said, patting me on the shoulder. "Prove yourself, and we'll see." In exchange for our six days of work a week, the kibbutz provided three meals a day, laundry service and

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a small living stipend for what would prove to be the kibbutz essentials: beer, cigarettes and condoms.

I never wanted to leave. Days began early with breakfasts of fruit and toast and cream cheese with chopped tomatoes and cucumbers picked the day before. My first week I cleaned toilets, mopped floors and scrubbed down tables; by week two I was promoted to the kitchen for peeling, slicing, mixing and grating. On week four I was moved into the fields. In the mornings I sipped hot coffee and shared a pre-dawn breakfast with the young men from the kibbutz I'd gotten drunk with the night before. After breakfast we climbed into the back of a truck and headed off to pick fruit and check irrigation pipes. I'd never been happier. I liked seeing dirt on my hands; I liked feeling useful and physically wrung out at the end of the day. I loved being part of a society that was based around something other than what I saw back then as suburban striving for status and money. Kibbutz members were farmers and cooks, accountants and teachers, parents and laundry attendants; at least theoretically, all were equal in the community.

After work—we were done by two or three—I'd spend the afternoon napping in my room, the air so thick and heavy with heat and humidity that by the time I woke up there'd be sweat stains on my pillowcase. I'd put on my swimsuit, grab my towel and book and head to the pool until dinnertime. The volunteers took up one side of the grass, the older members the other—I'd look across and watch the kibbutz children running in and out of the pool, the couples falling asleep on their towels, and let myself daydream about staying, about working in the fields by day and writing books in the afternoon like the Israeli novelist Amos Oz. Before dinner we'd quickly shower and change, and after closing

out the dining hall we'd hang out, smoking and gossiping before heading down into the bomb shelter that doubled as the pub.

After a beer or two, the Israelis would arrive. Kibbutz women generally kept clear of the bar, but men from the kibbutz, men on the make, would come down looking for easy-to-pick-up girls. Volunteers like me. For these guys—newly returned from military service and unattached, or the occasional slightly older guy who should have been home with his girlfriend or wife—the bomb shelter pub was like a stocked fishpond.

There were two men who stood out. Ari and Dov. They were the heartthrobs of the pub, proud sons of the kibbutz. Ari was blonde and sexy and arrogant; Dov was brown-haired and shy, more poetic, exquisitely built, long and sinewy. They were best friends. Dov had an on-again, off-again girlfriend in Tel Aviv. Ari had a new conquest every time a fresh batch of volunteers rolled through.

I'm not sure why Ari picked me that summer, but I felt lucky, special. Our relationship consisted of meeting in the pub and then heading back to his place. I told myself that I would hang out with him and have fun, but not sleep with him. The rules my mother had taught me were still in my head—date Jewish boys; don't sleep around ("Why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free?" she'd admonish); get a boyfriend and a law degree; be a good girl. Ari was definitely not my boyfriend—he wasn't even that nice to me. But it was exciting to argue with him, to exchange electrically charged banter, to skinny dip at two in the morning. And it felt great to be seen with him—occasionally I even let myself imagine that I could somehow make him fall in love with me. Mostly we fooled around, petting and pawing, like high school kids. Ari hadn't pushed things sexually and, besides, I had a secret crush on the more soulful-seeming Dov, though he and I hadn't moved beyond kibbutz pleasantries—*Do you have a light? Could you pass the baba ghanoush?*

One night down in the pub, I was sitting on Ari's lap listening to bad dance music—"All That She Wants" by Ace of Base played on a constant loop that summer. We were both getting drunk when Ari suggested we go back to his place and finally have sex. The complication, in addition to the fact that we'd never even come close before, was that his fling from the previous summer, an intimidatingly pretty former volunteer from Sweden with blonde hair and full breasts, was visiting the kibbutz for the weekend and hoping to stay at his place. He made it pretty clear that he was suggesting our first night together as a couple be a threesome.

"You've got to be kidding me."

If I wouldn't have sex with Ari on any old pub night, why on earth would I agree to a ménage à trois?

"What, tell me, *tagidi li*, are you scared?"

Of course I was scared. I was also turned on. I took a look at Dov who was seated at the next table—a leather necklace grazing his tanned neck, the self-tapered and cuffed black jeans and

the slight pompadour-like lilt of his hair—and came up with a radical proposal of my own.

“On one condition. You bring Dov, and we make it a four-some,” I answered, as if we were organizing a bridge game. I wouldn’t go all the way with Ari in the context of our flimsy to non-existent relationship, I concluded, using the logic of a buzzed 21-year-old, but a night of group sex during my summer adventure fell into a different category.

Ari grinned, whispered in Dov’s ear, and grabbed a bottle of vodka from behind the pub bar.

The four of us went back to Dov’s room.

“Let’s play Truth or Dare,” I suggested. Somehow, I’d become the initiator.

Really I was just channeling my inner Madonna.

“Ari and Dov, I dare you to kiss,” I said.

Unexpectedly, they took the dare. A joke—and then it wasn’t. Lips touching, then lingering, until the depth of their friendship, their boyhood bond, the army years, turned the kiss unexpectedly tender and real—beautiful, even. It didn’t take long until we were all in bed. Moving from one to another, swapping partners—first Ari and me, then me and Dov. The Swedish woman reached for me and I kissed her back, feeling the unexpected soft weight of her breast in my hand. What happened between the four of us

was consensual if vaguely dirty, friendly but devoid of love, hot though lacking in the sensuality that comes when you care, when you know someone. But I didn’t feel ashamed or like I’d been used. I felt as powerful and as in control sexually as those soldiers I’d seen out the window had seemed. I felt alive. The next morning was Shabbat, our day off, and we all went to breakfast together, hung-over and half shy.

The following day, Sunday, I went back to the fields. It was time to pick apples. In the orchard we were paired up, one person climbing up the short ladders to harvest while the other held the ladder before carrying the filled baskets of fruit back to the truck. Stefanie and I were partnered up; we still hadn’t talked about why I hadn’t come home on Friday night. I knew what she’d think without having to ask.

But I didn’t feel like a bad girl; I felt like a woman. Over the next several years, I’d continue to explore my sexuality. There would be plenty of non-Jewish boyfriends, and there would be more flings—the housing co-operative parties in Madison, Wisconsin, that became excuses to kiss each one of my roommates I had a crush on; the sculptor in Iowa who took me out for beers and grilled cheese and kissed me all night in his car during a summer thunderstorm; the broke and beautiful hipster band manager who spent New Year’s Eve with me in Brooklyn after I finally dumped my latest not-so-good-for-me boyfriend.

I’ve been married 10 years now, to a Jewish man, and am the mother of a five-year-old son. It’s been more than a dozen years since I’ve been with anyone other than my husband. The sex we have these days—when we make time to squeeze or schedule it in between parenting and working—is deeply familiar, intimate, emotional, and comfortingly predictable. When I look back on that long ago night in Israel, I regret nothing. ■

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