

*During the summer between my senior year in high school and my first year in college, I traveled with two friends to Israel where we backpacked around the country for three weeks. We spent a several days snorkeling in the Red Sea off the occupied Sinai Peninsula, near Dahab and Di'Zahav, and became stranded in Eilat over the Sabbath, when buses didn't run. By late Saturday afternoon we were stir crazy, sweltering hot, and numbingly bored, so we stood at the northernmost road intersection in Eilat and began thumbing for rides. In an hour we saw a total of two cars heading north, both of which were going to Yahel, the Kibbutz a half-hour up the road. Then a white van stopped, a windowless panel truck with no commercial identity.*

*The driver spoke no English, and his Hebrew was heavily accented, but with some back and forth we established that his name was Rami. He was driving a private ambulance to the airport at Lod, and we were welcome to climb in the back and sit on the fold-down bench, but there was a corpse on the floor.*

*We asked all of the usual questions you ask someone who offers you a lift while ferrying a corpse to the airport, such as "who is it?" and, "did you kill him?" After getting reasonable answers to most questions, Rami opened the back door for us to see. There was in fact plenty of room--the sheet-wrapped body lay on a very uncomfortable-looking canvas stretcher that separated it from the corrugated steel floor, and the side bench left plenty of clearance. "Is it going to smell?" I asked him. Rami said he didn't think so, and then whipped out a canister of air freshener like it was a six-shooter. "If it does, I've got this"*

*We piled in and he set off northward along the older Beersheba highway. I took the front passenger seat since it was available. A full moon, which appeared as a giant silver-white disk hovering on the Eastern horizon, cast an eerie array of moving shadows across the desert landscape as we drove. The setting could not have been more surreal.*

*The unfortunate soul in back turned out to be an American teenager from outside Chicago, one Eliezer Sperling, who had been killed in a car crash in Sharm el-Sheikh earlier in the day. A name tag was pinned to one of the straps keeping the body wrapped. Rami, who did appear somewhat saucer-eyed, soon volunteered that he had been driving for ten hours straight when he was called to go down to Sharm, so he was now wired on uppers. He then asked if me if I wanted to drive, suggesting maybe it wasn't the best thing for him to be doing.*

*So I took over the driving, and Rami goes into the back and lies down right alongside the corpse, stuffing my rolled sleeping bag under his head for a pillow. In no time he fell asleep, and I ended up driving all the way to Lod, where we woke Rami up, bought him coffee and bagels, and thanked him for the ride.*

*Two weeks later, I arrived at Brandeis as a freshman and discovered that I was the only one on my dorm floor who did not have an assigned roommate. When I checked with the Resident Advisor, I learned that I would have a single for the time being: the roommate who had originally been assigned had been killed two weeks earlier in a car crash in the Sinai desert. His name was Eli Sperling.*