Why Sayed Kashua is leaving Jerusalem and never coming back

Everything people had told him since he was a teenager is coming true. Jewish-Arab co-existence has failed.

I’m incapable of writing a word. I’ll wait until my boys get back from day camp, then maybe I’ll be able to calm down a little.

I should never have listened to my wife, I should never have let them go to their day camps, not today, not now. I left their big sister at home. She’s already a teenager, and it just could have been too much. “But why?” she shouted in the morning, already on her way out with her backpack to her group leaders’ course as part of an Education Ministry program. “Just because!” I retorted, and went back to listening to the news.
My children will soon be back and we will leave this place. This time it makes no difference what my wife says – I don’t care, she can say that I’m paranoid, that I’m hysterical, but I’m not letting my kids stay in Jerusalem. I’m going to pack their things for them, and as soon as they get home, I’m going to my parents’ with them. She can stay in Jerusalem if she wants, but I can’t be here anymore.

I will be in Tira with the kids for two or three days, maybe a week. Maybe I won’t come back at all. What is there for me in Jerusalem? In another month I’m flying abroad in any case. I have to call the travel agent and see how much it will cost to move up the date.

I also have to call my real estate agent, and tell him that the rental is no longer limited to a year – that the renters should be allowed to stay as long as they want. Because I’m not coming back to this building, not coming back to this neighborhood, not coming back to Jerusalem and maybe not coming back here at all. Maybe I’ll tell the realtor that instead of a rental, he should look for a place that’s for sale.

I will do whatever it takes not to come back here. I really have to work on my English over there. I absolutely have to start reading and writing only in English. I will use the year ahead while I’m teaching to adopt a new language for my writing. I know it’s not easy – I’ve already gone through it with Hebrew – but there’s no choice. I don’t know how much longer I can go on writing in Hebrew, I don’t know how many Hebrew speakers will still want to listen to me; I’m not sure there will be any point left to addressing them.

I will write in English, I will start to write love stories, the weather will become a major event in the plot, the snow will be a central character. I will write in English about the experiences of a migrant in a new country, about a political asylum seeker, about refugees from war.

I will write in English about the country I abandoned, I will try to write the truth, I will try to be accurate about the details in the hope that someone over there will believe me that this really happened. I will write about a far-off land in which children are shot, slaughtered, buried and burned, and the readers will probably think I am a fantasy writer.

But, hey, who said I have to write at all? I will do a little university teaching and then I’ll find a job. I can do anything, I don’t care. I’m ready to wash dishes, change tires and clean toilets.

I can be a taxi driver and live modestly in a small town; I will be a polite driver with an accent. If the passengers talk to me, I will answer them. And if they ask where the accent’s from and what country I’m from, I will tell them that I come from a scary place where people in suits and uniforms call on the masses to hate, kill, plunder and take revenge – sometimes in the name of religion, sometimes in the name of God, and all for the sake of the children’s future.

In the taxi I will only listen to music – even country music, for all I care – but never to the news. I mustn’t know who the politicians in the new place are, mustn’t know the names of the reporters, the anchors and the commentators, mustn’t take an interest in their opinions, their viewpoints or their world views. I will do my best to be a perpetual tourist there. Not to take things to heart, never to feel that I belong.

My children will soon be home and I will take them to Tira. I don’t want to stay here another minute. I will call the travel agent, maybe she can get us out of here tomorrow. My wife will scream that she has committed to working until the end of the month. She can stay here if she wants, she can join us next month.

“What don’t you understand?” I said to her when I begged her not to go to work. “It’s over.”

“Have you lost it?” she shouted back at me. “What in the blazes is over?”
I was silent, knowing that my attempt at living together with others in this country was over. That the lie I’d told my children about a future in which Arabs and Jews share the country equally was over.

I wanted to say to my wife that this is really the end, it’s finished. That I’d lost my small war, that everything people had told me since I was a teenager was coming true before my eyes. That all those who told me that there is a difference between blood and blood, between one person and another person, were right. That all those who told me that I have no place other than Tira spoke the truth.

But all I said to her was, “Good luck at work,” apologized for my exaggerated fears, and added that I was sure everything would be all right.

The children will soon be back from day camp and I will take them far away from here. Right now, though, I’m home with my firstborn daughter. She’s angry and has closeted herself in her room. I knock gently on the door, but she doesn’t answer.

She’s sitting on her bed with her computer. I sit down next to her on the bed, knowing I’m about to tell her what my father told me when I was a boy her age. It was my first day at a Jerusalem boarding school, where only Hebrew was spoken. My father drove me there from Tira, and a moment before parting from me, at the entrance to the school, he said, “Remember that for them you will always, but always, be an Arab, understand?”

“I understand,” my daughter said and hugged me close, “I understood it already by myself.”