

SHALOM TOWER SYNDROME

a novel by

Albert Russo

## CHAPTER ONE

Bloodcurdling scenes. Emaciated faces blown up on the circular wall. Expressions in shades of gray. My head begins to spin. I feel numb, mentally numb. This is a museum, isn't it? I hear the syncopated sighs of an elderly woman. Not far from her a little boy stares at his mother: she's weeping. Do people weep in museums? He seems puzzled, but he senses the gravity surrounding him and knows better than to ask questions. Everyone here looks so gloomy, so somber. Even the fat lady over there, wearing that ridiculous hat in the shape of a bird's nest. Such young children shouldn't be dragged to places like this. There will be enough occasions for them to suffer. Suffer... what does it mean? All of a sudden I feel a tightness inside of me. The pain... in my chest. I'm gasping for air. Serena has noticed and whispers: "Don't stay here. Go to the garden. I'll join you in a moment."

The sun is a reddish-yellow color, like the yolk of a monstrous egg, smouldering and about to explode over the desert. I shield my eyes against its glare. A soothing sound seeps into my brain. It is the putt putt of a sprinkler. Smell of newly mown grass.

At the far end of the kibbutz a cluster of jonquils stands guard before the wreckage of a WWII monoplane. Everything here seems incongruous: the neat, low-roofed bungalows, the futuristic museum whose wooden panels make it look like a church designed by Le Corbusier. The orange grove that stretches eastward of a mock battlefield with its war paraphernalia: trenches, rolling hills, ambushed trucks, wounded soldiers, the young boy holding a grenade behind an overturned tank, and a little further, covering two bodies, the remnants of a white and blue flag with the Star of David.

Gazing at the horizon, I perceive another soldier mannikin whose body lies stretched on the ground, his left arm thrust above his head and

holding a handkerchief; he must have been waving it in desperation. Devilish reconstruction of yesterday's and possibly tomorrow's gruesome reality. Twittering of birds. Children giggling near me. I can almost hear them breathing. Like those flowers burgeoning over the gangrenous crust of earth. Defiance of adversity. Some call it arrogance.

Serena comes out of the museum, chatting with a bearded, silver-haired man. Striking features. Obstinate forehead. He could be handsome. An Akademaim? Maybe. She has a flair for the uncommon, the eccentric, and the peculiar. And very often I agree with her choice. But now, I can't be bothered.

"Alec, this is Mr. Kishon who's a researcher at the Weizmann Institute."

"Your wife tells me that you are staying in Ashkelon. I spend my weekends there."

He rolls his r's in that distinct Sabra manner which is at once virile and a trifle insolent. It has its charm, sometimes, depending on who uses it. I really don't want to start a conversation. Let her do the talking. I'm getting a headache, I think.

"Serena, Mr... er ..." I utter.

"Kishon, Dave Kishon."

"Yes, well, please excuse me, I'm feeling nauseous again."

And it's no lie either.

During our ride back on the sherut - a marvellous meeting place, those collective taxis - I entrench myself behind the screen of tightly closed lids. Not a comfortable position, I admit, but it's the only deterrent against verbal assault.

A couple and a woman whom I greeted when I got in the cab are babbling away in Hebrew. I grasp a word here and there, especially when it is the person with the singsong who talks. Are they discussing family matters, work? The man has coarse fingers and a rugged skin. He laughs heartily, digging a nudge into my ribs. To excuse himself, he growls an endless 'sorriry', shakes my hand until I can hear the knuckles grit.

"Oh, that's okay!"

I could bash his head, but keep smiling instead - eyes shut again to discourage any familiarity. I lend an ear to the other side. Serena's arm rubs against mine each time the car jolts over a bump. She and that physicist are exchanging views.

“Yesterday two patrolmen were booby-trapped on the outskirts of Gaza. I don’t advise you to go there, even under escort.”

What did he say his name was again? Kishon! Would he be related to Efraim Kishon, the satirist? I like his wit. By the way, I forgot to buy the weekend issue of the Jerusalem Post. That’s when they feature his stories. Strange that I should have discovered him in Germany, of all places. He’s so often on the bestseller list there. In Italy nobody’s heard of him.

First stop. Out you go, the three of you. Chatterboxes!

“Shalom shalom. Enjoy your stay.”

I’ve lost the notion of laughter, let alone of enjoying things. Who ever gave me the idea of coming here, in my state? Land of milk, honey and blood. Land of exacerbation, where the value of each human being is so high and... volatile, that considering one’s ailments becomes almost ludicrous.

Never has the Jewish ‘third’ of me suffered from such acute estrangement while at once tightening its grip on my anima. Insidious, undaunted, it creeps under my skin as if to take revenge against the disregard I have so far shown toward its atavistic presence. I feel it stinging every one of my pores, clipping the raw ends of my fibers. In turn sweet and so acrid. A quagmire in which I am slowly drowning as the other two elements of my existential stuff dissolve. Whose blood is heavier to bear? That of Astrid, my beautiful mulatto mother converted to Catholicism by a missionary in Congo/Zaire? Or that of her husband who considered himself Florentine above all and peripherally, yes only peripherally Jewish? Whom should I hold responsible for the twelve years of Christian education I was exposed to while we lived in the Belgian Congo? Too long the Jewishness in me has been latent, neglected, taken for granted, like the myriad of antibodies which automatically build up in one’s organism.

“This is it!” Serena tells the sherut driver, handing him a ten pound note.

“I’ll get off too,” decides Mr. Kishon, “my house is just a few blocks away.”

As he walks us to the porch of our pension he turns to me and uses an unexpectedly soft tone:

“How’s that headache of yours? Won’t you join me this evening for dinner? I’ll make some barbecued lamb.”

I stare at him then stare at Serena, not that I'm waiting for her to answer. The concept of time has left me ever since I first set foot in this country.

"I'd be delighted ... he too, no ... Alexis?"

Looking through her, I nod an unconvincing 'yes'.

He produces a stained piece of paper from his shirt pocket, draws a map and jots down an address. Which he gives to my wife.

"Tov, I'll be expecting you around 8:30. OK?"

Whereupon he takes leave of us.

I hear a rustle from beneath the hedge. Such noises make me shudder. Is it a scorpion, a snake? No, it's that little kitten I saw the other day crossing the backyard. The feline population here is enormous. They're all over the place. Stray cats roaming from house to house, from apartment block to apartment block, from shops to outdoor cafes. There always seems to be a bowl of milk or scraps of food waiting for them somewhere. They're as free as the birds; the people here take their nomadic life for granted and seem totally happy with the situation, for I've never seen cats living indoors, as they do in Europe or in America.

"Kitty, kitty, kitty." I lure it with a play of fingers, then finally lift it. But now the kitten gets hysterical, sticks out its claws and digs them into the lower part of my arm.

"Let go, you pest!" I groan.

It hisses and writhes as if it were the prey. I thrust the animal to the ground with all my might. Hollow thump of a furry mass which rolls over itself before disappearing in the underbrush. Looking at the shredded geography of my flesh, I can almost hear the silky sound of pain. Ha, Cats of the Holy Land!

We're upstairs, in our bedroom. Serena is applying mercurochrome to my wound. She remains silent. I've noticed the wrinkles of lassitude on her face. A slight arching of the eyebrows, more eloquent than any other words. For Serena never gets into a temper. I am the extrovert, the nervous one. I was, at least until it happened several months ago. It started so quietly, so unobtrusively. You feel something leaking in you but don't know where it originates. It's slow and internal. You even cease to be aware of it. Because for a while the leaking abates. Then a drought settles in, sweeping through your plexus, and at this stage the process becomes irreversible. The walls inside begin to crack, like those of a cobnut tree bat-

tered by sandstorms. Yet, no one around you seems to hear the whistling of the gusts of wind, nor can they witness its corrosive effects. You're endowed with an extra pair of eyes, eyes which are turned inward, facing a landscape you are discovering for the first time, like that projected on a three-dimensional screen; but with one difference: you're both spectator and protagonist. The ambiguity reaches such proportions that you find yourself trapped between two equally 'real' worlds; and end up walking on the edge of a dam.

It manifested itself last winter. Serena and I decided to take a break from our grim, smog-filled Milan environment. We wished to avoid the Christmas throngs and the merry-go-rounds of vanity that so typify resorts like Cortina D'Ampezzo or Sestrieres. And we ended up in a tiny mountain village named Chiesa in Valmalenco.

During the day we walked through snow-covered fields and climbed the slopes that led to a tumble-down mansion - ideal set for a horror movie. There, we'd part company, for Serena would return to the village on skis.

The crispness of the air, the quality of the light, especially at night when the moon seemed so near, brushing the peaks, ready to topple down in a majestic avalanche at the slightest sound, were too much for me to bear. It was as though someone had taken an oath of silence on my behalf.

When I joined Serena in bed on the afternoon of New Year's Day, I fumbled for words, eyed her childishly and waited until she nodded before slipping into the ritual of lovemaking. We swayed in gentle tides, our movements obeying the mysterious commands of each other's impulses - impulses attuned to seven years of empathic chemistry. We climaxed together, mute, like first-time lovers gripped by fear and remorse. I had the sensation that something terribly stale had been wrung from my body, something ominous.

I got tense and felt gloomy, musing over a book I'd brought with me. It recounted the ordeal of two Rumanian sisters who had been released after thirteen years' imprisonment, for alleged anticommunist spying. No previous story had affected me to this extent. Not Solzhenitsyn's *Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, not even the deportation of my own grandparents. The fact that I'd met one of the sisters couldn't in itself explain the landslide in my emotional center of gravity. I acquired a taste, no, a craving for pain. It became so overpowering that even the contemplation of

beauty hurt me, as it does now, as if my eyelids were glued together and had to be brutally unsealed.

Serena is getting dressed for tonight's dinner. I have this sudden urge to exhibit my nudity. I want her to fondle me and make me come in her mouth, without my lifting a single finger. But she's busy applying mascara and tilts her head before the mirror with that half-absent look of hers which has always aroused in me - and in others as well - a sense of tenderness mixed with fascination. I often liked to tease her for being an American:

“You're terribly mysterious for a Yankee!”

She'd smile back as if to say: “What do you really know about America?”

Mr. Kishon hands me a plate of humus.

“If you don't mind, I'd rather taste this feta cheese.”

“The view from here is absolutely breathtaking,” Serena remarks. It's true, one wouldn't expect to see such high cliffs in this area. I walked along the ridge yesterday. It was desolate and quite awesome. I could have tried to jump but lacked the courage. Too dramatic. Sometimes I envy spies, if only for the fact that they can dispose of their lives so ... discreetly. All it takes is a small dose of cyanide. I can just imagine their grinning masks: “Talk of crass amateurism!”

Serena and our host are busy turning the skewers over a primitive brick hearth. The prurient sputter of the logs and the lamb's virile smell make my mouth water.

Glints of copper weave through Serena's hair. Two hands couldn't cup her mane, it's so thick.

There's a frankness I like about Mr. Kishon - well, Dave. I feel rotten, but not uncomfortable; he gives the impression of seeing further than my white lie about the headache.

“Alec, help yourself to some shish-kebab, before it all disappears. I'm as hungry as a bear.”

He chuckles while aligning three skewers on the plate Serena is holding for me.

Is it the breeze, the spicy aroma of grilled meat, this veranda from which the night and the sea blend into a soothing purgatory? Anyway, my nerves aren't so tense. To be enjoying food without gulping it down as if it

were the Last Supper is an experience I've almost forgotten. Pleasantness has become indeed very strange to me. A strangely pleasant evening. I don't remember much of it, except that I spoke about my love for the Black Continent, and the seventeen years I spent in Central Africa. Then the shock of Milan, its bustling, industrialized tempo. And my 'trinality'.

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