

Aziz

Fiction

There's a narrow strip of land in the midsection of Israel, running along the twenty-kilometer corridor from Karkur in the west to Megido (known biblically as Armageddon) in the east, and it is here, in Wadi Ara, that a dozen or so Arab villages and small towns have hunkered down, inward-looking and wary, praying to their own God for the best and always imagining the worst. On a clear night from two-thousand meters overhead, I used to occasionally see this corridor when I was a helicopter gunner in the IDF [Israel Defense Forces], and to this day I remember how the flickering lights below gave a tranquil, celestial sense, not less than the starlit sky above, and it was easy to forget for a moment (though only for a moment, since Captain Brodsky was always reminding us), that hovering around those earthly lights were men, and women, who hated us forever.

I had never actually been in any of those places, never met any of those men or women, and I admit that for many years I was inclined to believe unwaveringly in Brodsky's admonitions. We all did. They were the same prophecies that were delivered by our schoolteachers, or for that matter, by neighbors and friends who, like me, had never stepped foot in any of those villages or towns. To be sure, there were some Israelis — Jews, I mean — who did visit those villages and all other Arab cities and towns in Israel, and more than a few of these Jews who visited were "Shabbakniks" [members of the Shin Bet, the Israeli Security Services] who came to sniff around for potential problems. I never knew any of these people, or at least I thought I didn't, until that day when Aziz told me that Rami Ben-Zvi, the head of our Student Counseling Services at the university where we both were working as psychologists, used to be the head of the Shabbak unit for all of Wadi Ara.

"How the hell do you know that?" I asked Aziz, who happened to be the only Arab working at the Counseling Services.

"I know, believe me I know," he stated solemnly. "And my guess is that he's still working for them."

"And why are you telling me this?" I asked, somewhat perturbed at such a claim.

"Because I trust you."

"Trust me for what? And why?" I asked.

"*Yallah habibi*, just plain trust you. Nothing more, nothing less."

"I see . . ." I hesitated for a moment, not sure whether to let it go at that, and then found myself saying, "Really, I don't see. But knowing you, sooner or later you'll elaborate, won't you?"

Aziz looked at me with that inscrutable Mona Lisa smile of his, and said, “I’ve got to go see my patient. See you later.”

That same evening, I was eager to hear what my wife, Michal, had to say about Aziz’s assertions. She knew Aziz well since, as a social worker, she had been Aziz’s supervisor at Talbiya Hospital in Jerusalem. And she also knew Rami. To an outsider that may seem a strange coincidence, but actually we are a rather small community of psychotherapists here in Jerusalem, and we usually know one another, or at least about one another, or at least we think we do. We even know a good deal about some of each other’s private lives; or again, at least we think we do. Yet, when I mentioned to Michal that, according to Aziz, Rami had been some kind of macher with the Shabbak and that he might still be working for them, she was surprised just as I had been. Rami, after all, seemed to have none of the makings of a security officer or a spy. He was a bookish, religious guy, not especially interested in politics, and with a kind of disorganized and disheveled manner; and when it came to Arabs, he never had anything harsh to say. In fact, it was Rami who sought out an Arab therapist to work in the Student Counseling Services (to work with Arab patients, true), and as far as I could tell, he personally liked Aziz.

“But we are forgetting about one thing,” Michal said, as we sat there at the kitchen table finishing our usual supper of cucumber-tomato-olive salad with scrambled eggs and yogurt. “A Shabbaknik is likely to be a person who doesn’t look like a Shabbaknik.”

“So, tell me: Why do you think Aziz is wary of Rami?”

“His Jewish girlfriend, that new one at the Counseling Services — perhaps that’s got something to do with it,” Michal said, and then added with that full-body shrug of hers, “It’s not so easy to swallow, as you know very well. How would you feel if it was Ofra? Be honest now — how would *you* feel?”

Ofra, I should explain, is our eighteen-year-old daughter, a free spirit unlike her mother and me, though an almost exact replica — dark curly hair, blue eyes, and dimples — of her mother when I met her fresh out of the army thirty years ago. And, at the moment, I was uncomfortably aware that Michal was referring to a brief episode two years back when Ofra had brought home her “good friend,” Ahmad, whom she had met in one of those Jewish-Arab coexistence retreats at Kibbutz Ga’ash. Ofra had taken her good time before clarifying that Ahmad was “just a friend,” and Michal, who reads me like I was one of her patients, noticed a quick smile pass like a released bird over my (I like to think) usually calm, inexpressive, bearded face.

“I still don’t get why Rami should be bothered by who Aziz is dating,” I said. “I mean, she’s not his daughter, after all.”



“Look, Udi, maybe it’s nothing personal. You just said Rami’s with the Shabbak, right?” Michal smiled knowingly at me. “It could be that something is happening in Wadi Ara that neither of us has a clue about. Maybe in Aziz’s village, no?”

The previous month, for the first time, Aziz had invited me to his village in Wadi Ara. I was frankly surprised by the invitation. And when I say “village,” I do so because that’s how Aziz — and others from there — refer to the place, even though today some ten thousand souls live there, and nearly all the farmland has been converted to residential housing plots. I had a rather moot notion about Aziz’s family, the kind of inaccurate supposition that we Israeli Jews form out of scraps of information and heaps of suspicion. I had heard that, unlike Aziz, his family was religious and traditional with their one nod toward modernity being a penchant, and a rather successful one, for doing business. What kind of business I didn’t know, but I assumed it was profitable since they had generously supported their brother in seeking an education and career that must have seemed foreign to them.

The occasion for the visit was supposedly the eldest brother’s fiftieth birthday, but from the start I had a hunch that there was some other agenda in Aziz’s mind. You see, Aziz took special care that we arrive hours before the party itself, and what is more, when we pulled up to the two-story stone house and entered the extended garden of intoxicating lemon and orange trees, there was his eldest brother and three others, all dressed in jeans and starched white long-sleeve shirts (more informal than Aziz and I, since we came in slacks and sports jackets) and all stepping forth to meet me as if I were the head of some important delegation. “*Ahlan wasahlan fikkum, ifaddalu,*” came a quartet of voices and warm handshakes, as they stepped forward, seemingly in order of age. And actually, those were the final words of Arabic they spoke to me; from then on, each said what he had to say in Hebrew, and very fluent Hebrew at that.

We were ushered into the *diwan*, the men’s sitting room at the side of the house. Red velvet cushions lined the walls on three sides, Koranic verses and a photo of the Ka’aba in Mecca hung in gold frames on the far wall, and in the middle of the floor was a game of backgammon, which we evidently had interrupted. From an adjacent room came the pungent smell of coffee laced with cardamom, and presently a woman dressed in a flowing green *galabeya* and a white head scarf stepped into the *diwan* with a tray of six coffees and six portions of baklava which she daintily laid out for each of us without, I couldn’t help noticing, saying a word to anyone and seemingly without looking at me.



For the next half hour or so, Aziz's older brother, Mohammad — a heavy-set man with a neatly trimmed white beard and penetrating dark eyes — led the conversation. I was asked about my family, my daughter (not my wife), and was gently teased about being an “*abu binaat*” [father of daughters], just like Aziz's younger brother Mohsen whose face reddened when they revealed that he had sired five children, all girls so far. “But he is still working on getting a son,” declared Mohammad protectively, adding with a mischievous grin, “Or so I've heard from one very reliable source.” To which they all laughed heartily, glancing at me to see whether I was laughing too (I was). Then, as if the meeting had been choreographed this way — or so I felt — Mohammad said, “Now, our brother here, our beloved brother, is keeping us all in suspense, aren't you, Aziz?” Mohammad took a huge bite of his baklava. Still chewing, he turned to me, and as though the thought had just come to him, he said, “My dear Professor, you are Aziz's psychologist, right?”

“Not my psychologist, Mohammad,” Aziz said flatly but respectfully. “My supervisor. Udi, Professor Udi, I mean, is a senior colleague of mine.”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Mohammad swatted away a fly that was partaking of his baklava. “The good professor knows you well — that's what I mean. And what I wish to ask him . . .” He honed his eyes in on me now. “What I wish to ask you, sir, is how do you understand a brilliant man like my brother here, with a face like — look at that face of his! — like Omar Sharif, the young Omar Sharif before he drenched himself in alcohol; how to understand that a man thirty years old, a man of solid means and solid family, has nonetheless failed to do his duty and begin a family?”

I looked over at Aziz who had that Mona Lisa smile on his face. Evidently, he was expecting something like this. I didn't know what to say, and fortunately it was not necessary to say anything, because Mohammad resumed with authority: “No, no, Professor, don't feel obliged to answer for our brother. God gave him a clever tongue. He could have been a fine lawyer, part of our business. But never mind, he wishes to use his tongue as a psychologist, he makes his living that way. We all accept that . . .” Mohammad pointed to his brothers, all of whom were nodding. “May Allah bless and watch over him. But Allah watches over those who choose the right path, and the right path for our brother is to marry, bring children — even girls are fine — and to dwell in peace among us. Live in Jerusalem, fine, but build your *home* — with God's generosity, we shall build it for him — here beside us. Who to marry — Aziz will have to decide. His cousin's daughter, a beautiful girl of seventeen, adores him. But, Professor Udi, we are not dictators here. There are other fine young women from good, reliable



families here in the village. Let Aziz choose. God be with him, that's all I can say. Let him choose wisely."

I had no further chance that day to talk with Mohammad or any other of Aziz's brothers, since they were meeting, greeting, and eating with the overflow of guests who had come to the party. I did get to briefly meet Aziz's adoring cousin Fatma, who came dressed in a purple skirt and black silk blouse, and with a white scarf covering her hair but not her lovely face. She was careful to avoid talking directly to Aziz, though she kept glancing at him when he was chatting with her mother, and also chatting with me in Hebrew, which Fatma seemed eager to indicate that she understood; after all, as her mother mentioned, Fatma had already been accepted into the university's teacher-training program for the following year. Hearing this, Aziz offered his surprised but seemingly enthusiastic congratulations, first to the mother and then fleetingly to Fatma. "I'm sure she will do very well in her studies," Aziz stated in an unctuous manner that I had not seen from him before. "God will watch over her fortunes, I am sure." With that, Aziz bowed and briefly held Fatma's hand, which she extended to him like a spray of flowers, as her mother looked on proudly. Then he excused himself, saying we needed to return to Jerusalem for an important meeting that evening.

Spring came late to Jerusalem that year, but as always it brought its ephemeral bouquet. The almond trees, with their pink and white blossoms giving off a gentle adolescent fragrance all over the Judean hills surrounding Jerusalem; the pert red poppies still finding their way in the few untrammelled open spaces, where Arab shepherds used to graze their goats and sheep; and even the more orderly rainbows of tulips, a gift from the Dutch, which now perk up some parks on the west side of Jerusalem: all of this profusion erasing for a few short weeks one's usual awareness that we dwell on a somber desert of gray and brown that reclaims us the rest of the year, and makes us wonder — very well, makes *me* wonder at times — why in God's name we have spent millennia fighting over this particular sliver of real estate.

Arriving early on such a fine spring morning at the university's Counseling Services a couple of months after visiting Aziz's village, I felt that occasional moment known as "*she'at hesed*" [a time of grace], when even the most cynical among us believe good things can still happen, are still happening. It was a Wednesday morning, the day we have case presentations in small groups, and I was especially curious to hear the case that was about to be aired in our group, since I thought it offered an interesting opportunity for Jewish-Arab dialogue. One of the psychology interns, Yael, was struggling with a patient she had seen for a semester — a young Arab woman from the Galilee —



and she was turning to our group for some suggestions. Some of the other Jewish therapists had treated Arab patients before and, rightly or wrongly, considered themselves knowledgeable. And then there was Aziz, the only Arab therapist in our group of ten, and he was always providing gentle, encouraging observations, without — at least until that day — assuming the high ground of an insider’s expertise.

It was the second time that Yael was presenting the case; the first time had taken place earlier in the semester when the girl, a student in her final year of studies at the School of Social Work, had come to the Counseling Services with what we then decided was “examination anxiety.” In keeping with the group’s recommendations — and with Aziz’s advice — Yael had treated her patient, Maysoon, with the usual anti-anxiety cocktail of relaxation exercises and a referral to our psychiatrist for some mild sedatives. The therapy seemed to work: Maysoon passed all her finals “with honors,” and had only a short paper to complete for her practicum course before graduation. Yet, instead of finishing the paper, Maysoon had dawdled, partied, and after a night out in which she apparently got drunk for the first time, she now slipped into a serious depression. Yael was puzzled; and slumping back in her chair, she acknowledged, “I know I shouldn’t be, but . . . I admit it, I’m pissed off with Maysoon for screwing up herself — and also, I admit it, for screwing up the therapy.”

I glanced over at Aziz who was sitting there in a professorial pose — legs crossed, his right hand cradling his chin, a quizzical smile on his face. He seemed to sense what was coming, and, regrettably, so did I. The group pounced: one after the other, subtly and not so subtly, they attacked poor Yael for her “countertransferential” attitudes and her supposed prejudicial attitude toward Maysoon. Couldn’t Yael see — it was so obvious, the group members seemed to agree — that Maysoon was suffering a form of “success anxiety?” Maybe, they said, Yael was struggling with the same; wasn’t she also having trouble writing her MA thesis? In short, Yael needed to start curing herself, and only then could she help her patient, Maysoon.

Dead silence. There was blood in the water and the sharks had swum off. I knew that I had to say something to rescue the situation, but I had no idea what to say. Probably there was some truth, I thought, to the group’s assumptions. But they had been too harsh, too quick (as if they were compensating for some of their own uneasiness about working with Arab patients), and in any case, in their feeding frenzy, they had left murky what seemed to me the essential question: If they were correct about Maysoon’s “success anxiety,” why then did she, in particular, experience this? Obvious questions, and unfortunately, questions for which I had no answer, nor even a hunch.

Finally it was Aziz who broke the silence. “Let’s leave aside Yael’s



part in this,” he began, as if he were Solomon presiding over the case. “Not because what you say is untrue — in the end, only Yael can know that. But, I’m afraid you all . . . well, now it’s my turn to be a bit critical. What I want to say is that you are missing a crucial point. And that’s because you seem not to understand Arab village life . . .” Aziz paused, took a swig of his cold coffee, and then, glancing around the room at the attentive expressionless faces, continued: “How could you understand it, right? You are well-meaning, yes, but let’s face it: Can any of you, not just Yael here, can anyone here imagine what happens to Maysoun once she finishes her studies? She’s not like you — she’s not a Jew. She won’t be able to stay here in the city, get an apartment and a job. No! She’ll have to go back to her village, and her father and brothers will see to it that she’s married off to who-knows-whom, and for her that’s the end of her freedom. Five years of freedom here in Jerusalem — *khallis*, finished! So, what would you do in her situation? Finish your paper, graduate? No, hell no! You’d do everything possible, short of something shameful, to not graduate. This, my colleagues, is what you are not talking about and not seeing. Not necessarily because you are prejudiced. Why go there? It’s because you simply don’t know us. We live in a ghetto, and you, my Jewish friends, don’t know what goes on inside our ghetto. That’s the problem!” Aziz rose, wiped his brow with a black monogrammed handkerchief, and with an aristocratic bow excused himself from the room, as the rest of us sat there wordlessly, like chastened schoolchildren.

It was several days later, another fine spring day, when I saw Aziz again. He was with Rebecca, his American-Jewish girlfriend, and they were just coming out of the university building where we have the Counseling Services. Amazingly, they were holding hands and Rebecca was resting her head on Aziz’s shoulder. I say “amazingly,” because for the past year whenever I had seen them together in our offices, or at the university’s crowded cafeteria, or in the library, they never gave the impression that they were anything but collegial pals. True, they would have seemed to make a handsome pair — Aziz, with his “Omar Sharif” look and his immaculate manners, and Rebecca with her blond pageboy haircut, her designer jeans and floppy turtlenecks, all of which only served to accentuate her delicate femininity. Aziz had become her supervisor shortly after she arrived straight from her psychology graduate school in New York to spend what she called an “exploratory” year with us at the Counseling Services. Rami seemed to know her, or know of her, and he immediately gave her an unpaid position, principally working with American students who were doing a junior year abroad. I am not sure how it happened, but when she requested a supervisor, Aziz discreetly agreed to do it; and nobody,



not even Rami, saw fit to second-guess the arrangement. To me, and perhaps to one or two others, Aziz, some months later, mentioned that he wanted to date Rebecca, and accordingly she shifted supervisors to one of the senior women who Rami hand-picked for her. However, even when they began dating, Aziz — wisely, I thought — had kept his collegial distance from Rebecca; that is, until this day when I saw them together.

“Well, well,” I said, probably smirking, as we met in front of Aziz’s vintage Volvo. “Out of the closet, I presume.”

Aziz didn’t answer, but Rebecca in her husky New York accent, said, “About time, don’t you think?”

I chuckled, though I can remember thinking that they were about to submit themselves to the frothy gossip of some of their fellow therapists.

Aziz looked at me skeptically, as if this obvious display wasn’t really his idea, and then said, “She’s got more guts than I have, but that’s the way it always is, isn’t it? The women have more balls than we do, right?”

Rebecca kissed him on the cheek and, with more *chutzpah* than I imagined her capable of, said coquettishly, “You, my dear, are only partly right in that regard, thank goodness.”

Aziz blushed, and then kissed her on the forehead. “Look, sweetheart, why don’t you take the car back to my flat . . .” He winked at her, and she winked back. “Like I told you yesterday, I want to speak with Udi. I’ll catch up with you later, OK?”

Two or three times before, most recently on my birthday, Aziz had invited me to have lunch with him in one of his favorite hummus joints tucked obscurely within the labyrinth of the Old City. I hardly went over to the Old City anymore, not since the swarm of tourists had returned after the *intifada* dissipated. But like most Israeli Jews, I am an aficionado of hummus, and there was no doubt that the best places to feast on the stuff were on *their* side, the Eastern side, of Jerusalem, and especially within the Old City. Aziz knew these places, and as we walked he told me that it was in the Old City that he usually went on his dates with Rebecca. She loved it, though he was bothered by the fact that she referred to the place as “exotic,” like something out of the Travel Channel on TV.

For us and our cozy chat, the particular joint that Aziz chose that day was deep within the Armenian Quarter, a place that he knew would be empty at that hour, and where the raucousness of the Old City gave way to a hushed monkishness, which was another of the Old City’s charms. It turned out to be an unremarkable cellar where they make remarkable lemony hummus and also discs of Armenian pizza whose



aroma of rosemary and roast lamb wafted throughout the restaurant and in fact perfumed my shirt and hair (enticingly enough so that my wife, Michal, to this day, wishes I would take her there, even though she's aware that my memories of that afternoon's conversation with Aziz are far from sanguine).

You see, what Aziz explained to me that afternoon, as we sipped cup after cup of mint tea, was beyond anything I had imagined. Yes, he had warned me about Rami's connection with the Shabbak, but what he told me that day I hadn't come close to guessing. In a word, according to Aziz, Rami was determined to put an end to his relationship with Rebecca — so determined that he was willing to do whatever it took to accomplish this. Why? It turns out that his girlfriend, Rebecca Mirsky, is the daughter of Jacob Mirsky, a Jewish philanthropist from New York. Several projects at the university had received generous donations from Jacob Mirsky, and most recently Rami had managed to meet him during a fundraising trip to New York and to persuade the man to fund the sizeable expansion of our Counseling Services, which Rami had been dreaming of for years. So where does Rebecca fit into all this? She is not, never has been, a Zionist enthusiast like her father. He, a son of Holocaust victims and recently a widower, has been deeply troubled by his daughter's indifference to Judaism, including her having gone so far as to seriously date a Catholic guy during her college years. So, when she finished her training in psychology in New York, the old man managed to persuade Rebecca — despite her misgivings — to have an interesting venture and professional experience in Israel, and that he, Jacob Mirsky, knew a fellow who could be helpful in setting that up. Perhaps the old man thought she might meet some handsome, charming Israeli Jew. The last thing in the world he would expect is that the Israeli she met, dated, and fell in love with, was an Arab. Therefore, when some months back Aziz and Rebecca were beginning their relationship, Rami somehow (Aziz didn't know how, but the guy was a spy after all), somehow and somehow, sniffed out what was going on. Immediately he came to Aziz and told him that it would be best for everyone, and not least of all the Counseling Services, that he look elsewhere for female companionship. Aziz's response: "I told him that he was my boss, not my father, not even my older brother, and in polite language I told him to mind his own business."

And then, as Aziz put it, "Rami decided to put even more pressure on me."

"Through your family?" I surmised.

"Exactly. Through my brothers. Through Mohammad. Remember, Udi, our visit out there a couple of months ago? Mohammad already knew then that I was dating Rebecca. One of Rami's contacts in the area had tipped him off. Mohammad, though, wasn't real concerned.



Mohammad knows what goes on with lots of us guys from the village who go study and live in the cities. We can't date Arab girls — you know, they keep us at arm's length — so we date Jewish girls. It goes on for a while, and then we come back and marry a girl from our village. Mohammad figured that was what I was up to, and naturally I saw no reason to tell him how seriously I felt about Rebecca, that in my mind she is the one I want to marry. Maybe he sensed something. I don't know. He did give you that fancy speech of his about how and to whom I need to get married, right? But who knows what he was thinking on that day. Anyway, that's not the problem now."

"So what's the problem?" I asked.

Aziz motioned for me to pull my chair closer. Three black-robed Armenian priests had just entered the cellar and were settling in for some hummus and pizza, and Aziz was sure they understood Hebrew. We ordered two more cups of mint tea, and then in a muffled voice Aziz revealed the latest twist to Rami's tactics. "Now that Rebecca and I are out in the open — her idea, not mine, I assure you — Rami is furious. He knows there is no use in firing me, and he doesn't dare fire Rebecca. So what does he do? He tells me — just the other day he told me this — that he knows about my brothers' business plans. You don't know about my brothers' business, do you Udi?"

"No, you never told me," I said.

"Well, remember that cinderblock factory I pointed out to you down the road from Mohammad's house? It belongs to my brothers. That one, and two others in the village. That's how my family gets its money. We are the biggest supplier of construction blocks in the village. Good money in that, but the demand is getting less. My brothers want to expand. They have their eyes set on an enormous new project that's about to start in the Jewish area, near Megido. They will win the bid, on economic grounds they have it made because they can supply materials cheaper than any Jewish firm. *But*, here's the thing: to win the bid, because they're Arabs, they have to get a security clearance. Easy enough, just a formality usually — unless you have someone, some Shabbaknik, who gives you a black mark, says you're untrustworthy. Then you lose . . ." Aziz looked me in the eyes. "You see the problem, no?"

"So let me get this straight," I said. "You imagine Rami will blackball them . . ."

"I don't *imagine*," Aziz said bitterly. "I *know*! He's told me straight to my face. Either I drop Rebecca, or he'll blackball my brothers."

"And they know this?"

"No, not yet, anyway. Rami's given me a few days to think it over, and if he doesn't hear that Rebecca and I have ended it, he's going straight to Mohammad."



Aziz chugged down the last of his tea and then bit his lip. His handsome face had darkened into a scowl. I, too, was feeling angry, a kind of feeble anger, since I imagined there was very little at this point that could be done to change Rami's devious course. Finally, I said to Aziz, "So, tell me: What are you going to do?"

Aziz glared at me. "And what would you do?"

"I don't know. I'm not you."

"No, you're not! And consider yourself lucky that you're not, my friend . . ." Aziz rose abruptly from his chair, and said, "Come on, let me pay and let's get out of here."

That evening, as we went out for an evening walk in the garden near our apartment, I told Michal about Aziz's dilemma. She was as put off by Rami's machinations as I was, and she then asked me what, if anything, I intended to do now that I finally had a clear idea of what was going on.

"Not much I can do," I said. "I don't see Aziz bowing to Rami's demands. He's too proud for that. So Rami will go after his brothers — supposedly for the good of the Counseling Services . . ." I paused and then said hesitantly, "I could quit, resign. That is, assuming Rami goes ahead with his blackmail."

"Is that what you want to do?"

"In a way, yes. What do you think?"

Michal squeezed my hand. "I think it's best for you to decide, not me."

"Come on, Michal," I said, smirking. "You're playing shrink with me."

"No, I'm playing the good wife, Udi."

"Well, then, play the good shrink and hint to me what I should do."

"All right, if you insist . . ." Michal cleared her throat, and gave me a mock serious look. "My advice to you, Udi, is that you should not expect your wife to decide this thing. It's up to you, and if she's a good wife, she'll back whatever you do."

The following afternoon I went to see Rami. It was a Friday, and I knew he'd be in his office finishing up the week's paperwork, and the Counseling Services would be empty since patients and therapists would already have left for the weekend. A miserable *hamseen*, as often happens in the spring, was blowing its hot desert breath on the whole country, and especially Jerusalem. A light rain, laden with desert dust, fogged over my windshield as I drove to the university, and by the time I got there my new Fiat looked like it had taken a mud bath. Even the tulips and a late-blooming almond tree in front of our offices were drooping with the desert slime, and I noticed that my clothing,



too, was speckled with the desert muck.

My footsteps up the stairs and then into the suite of offices had for me an unfamiliar echo, but almost as if he knew I were coming, Rami's raspy voice boomed out as I entered the corridor: "Come in, come in, and tell me what you're doing here at this ungodly hour."

"*Shalom*, Rami, I figured you would be here at this ungodly hour." I forced a weak smile.

"Oh, it's you. I thought maybe it was her . . . but never mind, come in."

"I come on business, not pleasure, Rami."

"Of course, Udi, you've come to talk to me about Aziz, no?"

"Yes," I answered, surprised that he was not surprised.

"And you've come to . . ." He leaned back on his swivel chair and clasped his hands over his yarmulke. "You've come to give me a speech on professional ethics, right?"

"You could call it that."

"Well, *habibi*, don't bother!"

"Look here, Rami, we've known each other — what is it? — a dozen years now . . ."

"Fifteen years, for your information. Or if you want to count the time I met you briefly when you were a gunner in the helicopter corps and I was in the paratroopers, it's twenty-four years."

"OK, let's skip the memory lane stuff, then." I could feel myself about to lose it with him. "What you are doing with Aziz — and I've heard it all now — stinks to hell. And you know it, goddammit!"

"Calm yourself, Udi. What I'm doing is in the interests of the Counseling Services, which I, and you, too, want to protect."

"But not this way, Rami. Not by blackmailing Aziz."

Rami stood up, looked out of the window at the hamseen haze, and then stared at me, his eyes brimming with scorn. "Look here, Udi, stop your moralizing, all right? I don't give a shit who Aziz wants to screw around with. An Arab girl, a Jewish girl, or even a Jewish boy — it's all the same to me. But not with Rebecca Mirsky! It won't go on — not while I'm here. I'm not going to lose the support of her old man just because he's got the simple wish that his only daughter winds up marrying a Jew. Nothing so immoral or terrible about that, no? So just take your tidy morality elsewhere. And someday maybe you'll understand — God knows you should have figured this out already, being a helicopter gunner and all that — one seldom accomplishes anything worthwhile without getting one's hands a little dirty."

"Not just dirty in this case. Filthy!"

"All right, 'filthy' then." Rami had walked around me and was standing at his office door now.

"I've got half a mind to hand in my resignation right now," I said.



“Well, go home then, talk to your lovely wife, and listen to the other half of your mind, Udi. I’d be sorry to lose you. All of us here at the Counseling Services would be sorry . . . Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to get back to this truly dirty work of going through reports. I hope to see you back in the beginning of the week. *Shabat Shalom.*”

I’d like to be able to say that I did resign, that I went home and after talking again with Michal, I decided to take early retirement from the university’s Counseling Services. But I didn’t. I did talk to Michal, but as before, she refused to advise me. So, for reasons I thought at the time were altruistic — my wish to continue training young therapists — though, at bottom, probably for reasons that were just selfish, and maybe as deeply cynical as Rami’s, I chose to stay on working at the Counseling Services. The person who did quit immediately, or actually about a week after I had that conversation with Rami, was Aziz. He did it with his usual grace and elegance. He contacted an Arab woman therapist and arranged for her to come for an interview, and soon after, replace him in our small group. With little fuss, and a good deal of obfuscation, he explained to me and then to our group that he had received “a once-in-a-lifetime offer” to head a new clinic serving Arab patients in East Jerusalem. As for Rebecca, she too soon announced that she needed to stop her work a few months early due to “urgent family matters,” and left us all with the impression that she was returning forthwith to New York.

What happened to their romance I did not find out for quite a while. For a month or so after they left, there were rumors among some of the younger therapists at the Counseling Services that they had chanced upon Aziz and Rebecca walking together in the Old City. And after that, once or twice I heard that Aziz was seen going to the Old City, but without Rebecca. Nothing more than that. In order to respect Aziz’s privacy — and, I admit, to get my mind off the whole unfortunate business — I made no effort to contact him; and neither did he contact me. Of course, I did find myself speculating what might have happened to them. This occurred especially during that period after they both left, and Rami subsequently announced to all of us that we were about to expand our office space, and also hire ten more staff members to serve the new adolescent patients who would be coming from the nearby high schools; and furthermore, Rami cheerfully revealed, we would be hiring an additional Arab therapist who would run a new “Arab Psychotherapy Project,” and all those treating Arab patients henceforth would participate in a seminar about the cultural and psychological issues in treating these patients. Happy as I was with all these developments, I nonetheless found myself silently thinking, “Yes, Rami, but at what price?” To which I also responded,



in this impotent internal dialogue, “But haven’t Aziz’s brothers and Rebecca’s father played a part in this too?” And finally, “Have I, myself, been so pure in thought and deed that I should be judging others?”

With these thoughts ping-ponging in my head, and more importantly, because I genuinely liked Aziz, I felt a need — tinged with more than a little guilt — to know what actually did happen to him and Rebecca. And so I was relieved, though a bit anxious, when I received a phone call from Aziz the following spring, again inviting me to his village.

“Another birthday party for Mohammad?” I joked, at the end of the call.

“Let it be a surprise,” he said, in his usual noncommittal way.

“When should I come?”

“Tomorrow at noon,” he said firmly.

“Damn, Aziz, tomorrow is Wednesday. We have case presentations, you remember?”

“I forgot, sorry. But if you need me to write a letter to your boss requesting that you be excused, I’ll be glad to do so. Anyway, it’ll be at noon sharp — well, you know, Arab-time sharp — at Mohammad’s house. Hope to see you, *habibi*.”

As I pulled up to Mohammad’s house a little past noon, there at the gate was Aziz, as if he knew for sure that I was coming. He looked different now: a bit paunchier, his moustache and hair trimmed neatly, and wearing the same kind of jeans and starched white shirt that his brothers had worn when I met them a year back.

“Welcome, my friend, you are most welcome!” Aziz stepped forward and embraced me, planting a kiss on both my cheeks — something he had never done before. “Come in, let’s say a quick hello to Mohammad, all right?”

We entered the *diwan* where Mohammad was sitting alone on the floor cushions with coffee and a crystal bowl of fruit set out on the brass tray in front of him. He too gave me an effusive hello, and then without any preliminary small talk, he said, “Me, my brothers, are so grateful to have Aziz home again. You cannot imagine, my dear Professor, how we rejoice that our brother has decided to rejoin us . . .” I gave Aziz a fleeting skeptical look, but he was sipping his cardamom-laced coffee and didn’t notice. Mohammad, however, did catch my glance, and he said in a jovial voice, “Oh, yes, we are very glad. Aziz came back just in time. We need him to work with us . . .” Mohammad took a pearl-studded Bedouin dagger from the brass tray and began slicing apples and cucumbers, which he passed out to us. “Not as a psychologist — no, no. Though maybe someday we will need him there, too.” Mohammad laughed loudly, and Aziz chuckled



without looking at his brother. “No, Aziz is our new accountant. Not a professional one, but good enough for our purposes right now. Until we get the Megido project fully underway. Then we may need to find some additional professional help, but right now Aziz is doing fine. Aren’t you, my brother?” And Aziz nodded, though without the enthusiasm of his brother.

A few minutes later, after this somewhat surprising greeting from Mohammad, Aziz and I headed out in his Volvo to the northern reaches of the village, as per Aziz’s request, to one of the few spots where one might be alone. It turned out to be an abandoned rock-strewn area with some large boulders forming a circle around a damp island of weeds. A cloud of gnats circled above us as a pair of green lizards sunned themselves on one of the boulders.

“Believe it or not,” said Aziz contemplatively, as we walked slowly around the area, “right here where we are walking used to be the place where the village — back when we were only a village — would get its water. Before the Jews came and put in pipes, this was our watering hole. During the day, the place was busy with women carrying jugs on their heads. At night, well . . .” Aziz pulled his eyes away from mine. “At night, right here is the place, so I was told, where daring lovers came to risk everything for a stolen embrace. More than one family, so I’ve been told, owes its existence to this place and its obliging darkness.”

I looked down at the patch of weeds, and then inadvertently found myself glancing skyward, imagining that this might have been one of those countless areas in Wadi Ara that I had flown over in a helicopter and where I had been peering down into the darkness for suspicious activity. Thank goodness, I thought, at least in this area my binoculars had picked up nothing. Aziz did not know about this past of mine, and I said nothing of what I was thinking at that moment.

“I suppose you are wondering,” Aziz said, “about what Mohammad just told you.”

“Yes, naturally.”

“I’m still working once a week at the clinic in East Jerusalem. I commute from here. And I’ve recently opened up a practice in the village. Not very lucrative, but it pays something. I can use the money now that I’m thinking of getting married. My fiancée, my cousin’s daughter Fatma — remember, you met her last year — she and I plan to get engaged in the winter and then get married next spring. I hope you will come.”

I looked at him, no doubt with some shock on my face — not so much because I was surprised by the outcome, but because of his dry, unemotional way of announcing it. Finally I said, “Yes, of course I will, as long as it’s not on a Wednesday, though.” We both laughed uneasily.



“And if you don’t mind my asking,” I said, “What about Rebecca?”

Aziz’s face tightened, and he replied coolly, “She just got engaged — to some psychiatrist in New York. A Jewish guy I think; at least he’s got a Jewish name. She sent me an e-mail last week.”

“I see . . . well, I guess it sort of worked out then.”

Aziz didn’t respond except to say that today he and I were both invited to his fiancée’s house for lunch. We got into his Volvo and drove back through the twisting dusty streets and over to Fatma’s simple, one-story house that was surrounded by purple and pink bougainvillea and flowing jasmine vines whose fragrance seemed to mix with the odor of nearby grazing sheep. Aziz parked the car and as we looked up, Fatma, in a red-and-black *galabeya* and a green headscarf, was standing at the door of her house, smiling buoyantly.

“Yes, Aziz, I’m glad things are falling into place for you,” I said, patting him on the shoulder. And I added, with what felt like an excess of enthusiasm, “*Mazal tov, Mabruk!*”

Aziz glanced at me, nodded gently, and then his face covered over with that Mona Lisa smile of his. I wondered whether at that moment Aziz, himself, knew what he was thinking. Only now, several months later, I am inclined to believe that he had already envisioned his future. He never told me any of it. It was his brother Mohammad who called me only a few days ago to ask if I knew where in Canada Aziz had gone, stating that Aziz had left no forwarding address, but only a brief letter of apology to Fatma and her family, wishing her the best and declaring that he would be gone forever.

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