

***From Chapter 1:***



I don't know what it was. It might have been a head, or perhaps a hand or foot, it went by so fast, but following it, as if pulling a wire, came the explosion, and instantaneously the window I was sitting beside shattered. I can remember distinctly the feeling of glass slicing my skin – it was remarkably painless. At the same time, I fell sideways off my chair and landed at the foot of the drafting table, which I suppose is what saved me, for the entire window, the window I loved, the window that gave my studio an enchanting hint of antiquity in this otherwise modern neighborhood and suffused the entire room with light all the seasons of the year, crashed down in a thunder of tinkerbells; but not upon me. The drafting table was my umbrella. When it was finally quiet – and it was a quiet I had never heard before, a quiet that was a chasm between the breath before and the breath after -- I looked up and saw a huge spur of glass hanging over the edge of the table, teetering just above my face. In that second, I thought of two things. I thought of God, and I thought of *Kristalnacht*. Then everything was noise – I couldn't tell what -- screaming? sirens? cries for help? -- and an incredible ringing in my ears that I thought might be angels crying, or laughing, or perhaps it was the ringing you hear when you are actually deaf.

Looking up at the overhang of glass, I almost thought I was standing behind a waterfall, and the thunder I was feeling was the water careening down the cliff face. But I understood this was an illusion. I was on the floor and a bomb had just gone off. And the object flying past my window? It probably had been the head of the bomber, winking at me. But I was also aware that Amoz and Tsipa were speaking to me. Their desks were situated far from the window, all the way on the other side of the office, where I had put them. Now they were bending over me, breaking the curtain of water. I could see they were moving their mouths, but I could not hear them, so I smiled up at them and said Shalom. But they did not seem to hear me either, and they did not smile back. And that is all I remember of that moment.

I woke up in the ambulance. The paramedic was ultra-orthodox, like the guys who come round afterwards and pick up body parts. His name tag read “Moishe.” He had a greenish piece of salami stuck between his teeth and a beard that would be hanging down to his navel except that it was stuffed in a paper bonnet. He was wearing a day-glo orange security vest, a black skull cap, and eyeglasses that had slipped down onto the tip of his nose. But he seemed to know what he was doing.

“Keep calm,” he said.

“Where am I?”

He looked out the back window. “On Yehudah Street.”

Literalness, I had learned, was often a consequence of studying Talmud. “I mean, what happened?”

He patted my hand. “You were in a terrorist attack. I’m guessing it’s Hamas, but it could be Fatah or Islamic Jihad. I don’t think it was Hezbollah. Yes, most likely Hamas.”

“How do you know?”

He shrugged. “You get a feeling for these things.”

“Am I going to die?”

“It’s possible.” He felt my torso. “But highly unlikely. It looks like you have some superficial cuts.”

I tried getting a glimpse out the window.

“Don’t move! One move and you could push that piece of glass right into your brain. Then you definitely would die.”

“There’s glass sticking out of my head?”

“A very big piece. If it was a mirror, I could do my make-up in it. And frankly I wouldn’t talk so much, there’s also glass jutting out of your cheek. You don’t want to cut your tongue off. But don’t worry. I’m here to save you. That’s my job.”

“You’re a religious man, right?”

“Of course.”

“What does God say about all this?”

“About what?”

“About bombs going off in cafés and architectural offices and innocent people having their heads blown off and me with so much glass in me I could pass for a Tiffany lamp?”

“Not a café. It was the bus stop at the corner under your building. But you knew that from the trajectory of the head I sent as a warning.”

“Yes, I saw it. I ducked.”

“You didn’t duck, you moved five centimeters to the left and raised your right arm ten centimeters from its position above your drafting table, which caused the flying glass to be deflected from your carotid artery and instead cut the nerve in your triceps brachii, which will cause you only minor annoyance for the rest of the year, instead of having killed you instantly.”

“What about the glass in my forehead and my cheek?”

“Incidental. It will give you scars of which you will be justly proud. It will possibly end in several highly successful sexual encounters, if you play your cards right.”

“So you saved my life?”

“I did.”

“But why?”

“But why?” he asked back.

“Yes, but why?”

“Hold on, I have to check your fluids.”

Being in the hands of someone so experienced seemed to calm me down, and I passed out again. When I next awoke I was still in the ambulance, but there was a beautiful Sephardic woman leaning over me, green eyes and coffee skin.

“Where’s the other guy?” I said.

“What other guy?”

I attempted to search the ambulance, but my neck was in a brace and I couldn’t move.

“It’s just me,” she said. “You’ll have to settle for me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You were in a terrorist attack,” she explained.

“How...?”

“I don’t know. A bus stop, I think.”

“But how did you get here?”

She took my hand. “We’re almost there.”

“Where’s that Moishe guy?”

“Stay calm.”

“But he knew what he was doing!”

When I opened my eyes again I was in the hospital and Anyusha was sitting next to the bed reading a comic book. “Hi, *Papoola!*” she said. She called me dad using the Russian diminutive because I hated when she did that.

“What are you doing here?” I said.

“Duh,” she replied.

Anna, whom I call Anyusha -- a name I made up one day, although sometimes I call her Anya, Anyula, Anechka, Anyuta or Anka depending on my mood -- was only thirteen at the time. She set her comic book on the chair and moved closer to me. She was staring at my face with what I thought was morbid curiosity.

“Is it bad?” I asked her.

....

### ***From Chapter 2:***

☾

At the last minute there was a face, a young girl looking out the window of the bus, and not even looking at me, just out the window, her eyes wide with the life that was so new to her. Perhaps she was thinking she had not done her homework and the wide eyes were imagining the scene when she would be called upon to do her report, or maybe she was just watching the people pass by. I don’t know. But her eyes were blue, like mine. I decided to press the button, but not on the bus. Just like that, things change. So the last thing I saw before I pushed the unlock on the key which Ra’id

Mashriki had given me was the way this little girl blinked, so slowly, as if she could not bear to close those wide eyes to this beautiful world even for a fraction of a second.

I was not intending to kill anyone specifically, with the exception of course of myself, but I certainly had it in my mind to destroy as many of my enemies as I could. So in spite of the girl, I am proud of that. I am content.

But I am confused that I am not in Paradise with my dark-eyed maidens and rivers of wine, at peace with the pleasure of Allah and his Companions. I am aware I have been following this man, Roman Guttman. I understand, though I don't know how, that he is an architect, famous for a certain style, which his admirers refer to as "Romanesque." It is a style you will not see in the neighborhood in which my mother Najya is now secretly weeping uncontrollably and my father Abdul-Latif is sitting on the floor staring at his hands. The apartment Roman Guttman designed in Netanya with the swimming pool in the living room, or the house on Mt. Carmel, which looks rather like a tarantula wearing a golden skull cap – these you will not find in Jabal or Hebron, in Qalqilia or my own Beit Ibrahim.

Shouldn't Roman Guttman be as dead as I am? Shouldn't he be suffering the torments of hell? Apparently Allah had other plans, since He sent my head to warn him, why I cannot say. Who am I that Allah might confide in me? I would quote from the Holy Quran at this point, but that is the problem, that is the essence of the whole problem: I have never been able to memorize it. Not really any of it, save the seven tender verses, and not even those very well.

Perhaps I'm supposed to speak to him, but where are my vocal chords? It seems I am all thought and no sensation! Except for this feeling of mute giddiness, the kind one gets when dreaming of flying -- weightless but always on the verge of falling, as if held aloft by an endless length of twine that at any moment could be cut and down you go.

It's not a bad feeling, really.

....