

## Clean Slate

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translated by Alan Sacks

I.

Yes, for me too, that was my first encounter with a real impostor. Of course, I did not believe it at first. I behaved as everyone did. No one wanted to believe that our Yehoshua, Shuka Mashiah, the platoon clerk, was an impostor from so far back that a long-standing dossier of suspicions against him amounted to a thick file. As later became clear, he was no mere impostor but a cruel one. He worked as a junior associate in a small town law office in Gush Dan. His manners were so refined that I could not imagine that he was capable of such despicable acts.

But these were professional airs he affected, a magisterial flourish of the hand when signing a document, the aura of a haughty sense of confidence while examining a contract's fine print. These were the clever traps he set at his desk. He was a small man, slightly built, not strong. He was quick to redden at the slightest matter and whined like a woman. "Shuka, come here, girl," the men taunted him. "Shuka, hey, don't go. Be a good girl, Shuka, and bring us something to drink." The jeers thinly veiled the revenge they sought for the man who had betrayed their trust, who had cheated them like faceless clients of his law office, as if they had not cowered together, shoulder to shoulder, night and day, under mind-numbing bombardments.

He was called up some days after the war broke out. He was not easy to find, he told us, which was why he joined us late. We could not possibly lose the war, he teased: every position in the platoon had been filled before he arrived. A spot was found for him as assistant to the platoon clerk but he soon took control, ensnaring our apathetic commander in a craftily woven web of compliments and flattery.

Why had he not been found at home? Why had he been late arriving at the emergency depot? Pure idiocy, the blockheads in mobilization forgot that he had recently changed addresses. He had moved to a run-down Orthodox neighborhood in Bnei Brak of small, crowded homes forever steaming with heat and dampness in summer and cooking fumes in winter. From their cramped porches bursting with children rose swarms of flying bees and a melody of foreign Hebrew mixed with Yiddish. There was no post office or telephone, nor any conscripts to be rounded up. His call up order skipped from one end of town to the other until he was finally located.

The neighbors watched in surprise as he went down the peeling steps. Still unsure what to make of him, they accompanied him with muttered prayers of mercy. "Yes, go, don't worry. We will pray for your safety without rest. Fear not, my servant, be not afraid, O worm Jacob." And then, quietly, they whispered to him, "The war won't be over so quickly. Some crumbs of the cake will be left even for you."

Bnei Brak is a small town in the Gush Dan region, built long ago on swamp land overrun with brambles. There is nothing behind it but dense groves of oranges. In his dreams, the dark groves were like the patches of children's forests back in Europe. Twice each day, the train to Jerusalem whistled just outside his window. On rainy winter mornings, puddles of water lapped over the sidewalks and doorways into the little houses. He never spoke so much as a word about the

family he once had, even on evenings dripping with heart-rending nostalgia. When we sat in the dark, sealed in our bunkers and frozen hilltop outposts, hearts opened and the men recalled events of their former lives buried for years. But Shuka Mashiah did not soften.

Yes, its true, he once had a family. The battalion gossiped about the two small daughters and a wife he had been obliged to place in a hospital. They had scattered to every corner of the land. He had erased them from his life and now, though he was certain they knew he had been called to the northern front, they did not even write him. He really did seem truthful describing the breakup of his family. We secretly inspected his personal mail for some weeks. No word at all came from his kin, only those scented pink and blue letters from the divorced woman in Tiberias whom he deceived free of any guilty pangs of conscience.

He was a junior associate, shuffling papers from one desk to another in the law offices where he was employed. He raced after the attorneys when they called on clients, set out refreshments, served them cups of tea and cleaned up when they left. How easy it is to see him, a foppish smile on his face, taking on extra tasks as he did with the platoon's papers. The work, though not exceptionally demanding, by its nature was humiliating. He makes that a game with them. They move him about like a piece of office furniture. "Fine, but we'll see." He labors like an Arab porter. There is something in the joke that changes the entire picture. Shuka Mashiah, a junior associate in whom their confidence was still reserved, very reserved.

But he laughs at all of us, the soldiers and commanders and lawyers, even his landlord. He grunts with effort. A glow suddenly flickers on his red face deep in heaps of paper. He winks at us watching him with trepidation. Then, in military jargon seasoned with a dash of the hybrid language of Bnei Brak, he says, "We'll see who is really the boss around here." Not all his virtues and charm were revealed when he became our platoon clerk. Still, with Moshe from the motor pool and Franco the driver, I made the effort to travel to the law offices where he worked. It was clear from the earnest descriptions the people in the office provided that they too saw him as a strange bird ill suited to his tasks. But it never crossed their minds either that they were dealing with a skilled con artist.

I learned from them about his movements, his appealing delivery, his clownish games. He would spend hours glued to the telephone, head bent over the receiver, in hushed tones whispering every imaginable term of endearment to women far, far away. The boys once accidentally overheard a call. It seems he was engrossed in pledging marriage to a nubile secretary he knew in another office. What didn't he promise her? What words didn't he speak? He boasted that there was nothing he couldn't do for her, even going AWOL and deserting the trenches. The way he coaxed her, he was nearly kneeling before the telephone. They were not exaggerating in the least. I confirmed their accounts and even added to them. What I could not forget were the long telephone conversations with his betrothed, the beautiful, innocent divorcee in Tiberias.

"My little darling, sugar, listen to me. Listen to me for a minute. You just don't know what you're saying. You're such a simple innocent, they'll eat you up. Listen to me, I know my way around this sort of business. Its not just because I'm an experienced lawyer. I work magic over the clients. They simply can't resist me. You'll see." The men were utterly bewildered by this flood of sweet talk. Not once could we determine the subject of his conversations with the naive little darling. Lots for sale in a Tiberias neighborhood? The battered car he urged her to sell? Money she and her elderly mother kept in a savings account? This swindler, inflicted with the disease of

selling lots and buying apartments, cheated his women without a qualm. Like a busy spider, he spun his webs of fine silk. He snared them the way he might drape their bodies in a new dress he had bought just for them. None of the men attributed much importance to his burlings. There was a war out there, and it shook up everything else. Nothing was as solid as it had been before. Men seduced women on the telephone or on long rides to the front or in the dance halls of Tiberias. No evil was apparent yet in any of his actions. How could I guess that Shuka Mashiah - "Fear not, O worm Jacob, go, we will pray for you" - how could I guess that he was a criminal charlatan?

## II.

I remember one icy morning clear and crystalline as the tang of a glass bell. Shuka Mashiah rose early as usual and flung himself into the snow accumulated in the encampment. He undressed and rubbed his red body with handfuls of packed snow. Where had he learned such alien habits of hygiene? He gargled cheerfully, danced on the snow and inhaled the cold, translucent air. Each morning, he made a short run around the basalt compound. Burning his skin, he leapt over low stone walls and hopped into the armored personnel carrier encrusted with ice. The boys set an ambush for him and waited for the right moment to bring him down. His morning acrobatics disgusted them. When he was done, he would do nothing the rest of the day. He stuck like a leech to the tongue-tied cook, bullying him and shooing him to the coffee on the stove. He pestered the platoon's blasé commander, meddled in our files and fixed the rosters for guard duty and leaves.

When he finished his exercises and dashed home to the glowing hut, the boys blocked him outside the door. He was dragged just as he was, in his long underwear and winter issue undershirt, back into the snow. The daily ceremony of pampering his body enraged the boys. Franco the driver swore to pay him back with a good whipping. "*Shukeleh* you *cuteseleh*, I'm begging you, take off that undershirt for just a minute. Come on, let's see that manly body of yours you tend every morning." He groveled before them in the snow, naked, but the boys showed him no mercy. "*Shukeleh* you *cuteseleh*, come on, let's see what you have under your long johns." The boys pulled off his underwear and pounded his genitals with fistfuls of crushed snow. He screamed and pleaded and tried to alert the platoon commander. No one heard his cries for help. Sobbing, he turned red to the roots of his thinning hair and tried to kick the boys assaulting him. "*Shukeleh* you *cuteseleh*, show us the jewels between your legs."

He growled in the snow. The boys laughed in his face at his threats. "Listen to me, Shuka, listen to a man of experience. Stop annoying us with your ritual of skin creams and ointments, spare us your toupee. You're nothing but a platoon clerk, a lowly paper shuffler, no more. You are not the platoon commander's lieutenant. Nor are you the adjutant. Really, you are nobody. You do not plan the ambushes or decide where the guard posts will be. You can't deny anyone a pass. Make an impression with your papers on the recruits. What a miserable little clerk you are, a worm prettying himself with cosmetics." They planted themselves in a circle over him. He writhed in the snow, his pink flesh sparkling as far as the eye could see in the glass-like clarity of the morning. Finally, they stamped on his body as though he were a bag of trash.

Then the door of the shack slowly opened and the platoon commander stretched his limbs and yawned into the bright sun.

"That's enough, leave Shuka alone I say." The boys walked off, disappearing into the kitchen and the fuel depot and the ammunition dump. Some returned to the bunker to clear the door of snow that had drifted up during the night. Shuka Mashiah smiled at the platoon commander and quickly slipped on his long underwear. "Keeping in shape, eh, Shuka? I've never seen such a health fanatic. I swear, you're as fit and sleek as a cat. How do you manage it? Hurry up, Shuka, after breakfast we have to drive to battalion headquarters. There is plenty of work ahead of us. Come on now, get dressed." The platoon commander walked to the urination wall at the edge and leisurely relieved himself as though he had seen nothing and heard nothing, as though he did not understand what no one could have failed to grasp from the sight before him.

Meanwhile, Franco the driver grabbed Shuka and, out of sight of the others, dragged him away from the shack. "Just a moment," said Franco, "we're not done yet." A brief fist fight broke out, ending with Shuka once again prone and helpless in the snow. The boys rushed back, got him to his feet and helped him into the shack. "Hey, health worm, you heard what the platoon commander said. You have to get going." He was thrown into his bed and cried soundlessly on the soaking sleeping bag until his pale skin regained its unalloyed pink hue. In the motley language he had acquired in Bnei Brak, he muttered oaths of vengeance. It was not long before he made a complete recovery, truly a cat that always lands on its feet. Already, his sharp tongue had the cook serving him at his beck and call and heeding his command to fry up the pancakes at once for the early trip to brigade HQ. By the afternoon, he was seated again in his makeshift office between the tight rows of beds. He stretched out with the telephone, telling his little darling, the beautiful and innocent *divorcelah*, how pleasant mornings were here in the trenches.

And how quiet everything now was. The cannons did not thunder and fluttering flocks of black jackdaws flew past outside. Their chatter was music to his ears. They roosted by the camp's little garbage dump. "My sweet, did you know that a small, abandoned orchard was left there? Some bare almond trees and a poor poplar. Our cook is excellent and generous to boot. No homemade porridge can warm your heart like the chocolate porridge he cooks on chilly mornings. What is there for you to complain about, sugar? You know there was never a time when life was so kind to us. Oh, as for the price of the lot that cheat of an agent offered you, don't you dare listen to him. That crook, a liar and the son of a liar. He's another of those war parasites taking advantage of unsuspecting women in uniform. No signature, no notice and no documents until its time for a leave. Then together, my darling, together we will go and see about buying the lot."

When the platoon commander and his aides returned that evening from a long reconnaissance tour, the kerosene heaters were already burning, the shack already alight. The skittish motor of the generator raised a racket behind the earthen embankment. Shuka Mashiah, snapping at the cook's heels, drove him into the kitchen. "Hop to it, dinner for the platoon commander. And make sure its hot. And a small serving, too, for these bone-chilled men. You've wasted enough time today. You play cards the whole day long, shoot dice at night, drink against regulations, the works. Don't think we don't see or know it. This platoon's tireless clerk records it all in his files. It's our good fortune that he received first rate preparation in the law office."

Just then, the platoon commander spoke up in a loud voice audible throughout the little post. "Make any good deals today, Shuka? Did you sell cheap flats to half the battalion? Tell us, where do you get it all, eh? You're agent and broker and contractor all in one. Don't you gild the lily just a little, Shuka? No need for caution?" The boys stared at him. All the blows suffered that morning, all the humiliation, everything was blotted out as though it had never happened. He told

them with a laugh how his pious neighbors in the cramped house in Bnei Brak had seen him off. But he omitted the whispers, "Fear not, O worm Jacob. Our prayers will protect you. Go, go, don't worry, your share of crumbs from the cake of war will still be there." Nor did he tell them that he could swiftly translate those words into Yiddish. He did not need to tell the boys everything. He had said more than enough that day.

### III.

How much more do I remember of that eventful day? Nearly everything that happened. I am slightly uncertain only of the order of events. I remember the exhausting ride from the Golan Heights to Bnei Brak. I remember the tense return in the dark, then the way a vicious quarrel sprang up in our shack. Shuka Mashiah lost all control of his actions. He pointed his Uzi, cocked and ready, at Moshe from the motor pool. Only my own unexpected presence of mind in the crisis prevented a fatal burst. I pounced on him just as we had been drilled in basic training years and years before. I raised the barrel with my left hand towards the pocked metal sheeting on the ceiling of our decrepit shack while with my right, which was still nimble at the time, I pressed hard on the magazine catch and tried to retract it. Shuka squeezed the trigger in anger, and the bolt snapped free into the barrel. But the magazine had already ejected onto the sleeping bag and no shots were fired.

Then, and only then, when the magazine clattered to the floor, and each man watching breathed a deep and secret sigh of relief, the platoon's indifferent commander glanced up from the evening newspaper we had bought on the road. "Enough horsing around, boys," he said, "I want you to settle down now. Don't go too far. I know how to blow my stack, too." He lowered his eyes to the page again. I paled. So did Shuka Mashiah on his bed. Moshe from the motor pool bent over him, and the other men backed against the walls, also turned white. Suddenly, I couldn't breathe. Something heavy seemed to strangle me. I threw the empty Uzi at the platoon commander's bed and said, "That's enough for me. I need to get outside for some.

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stumbled to the door, and down the corridor steps. The door opened and I was out into the night. I had a cigarette in my hand and a pack of cigarettes in my pocket. I lit the cigarette and took a drag. I felt a little better. I walked towards the motor pool. I saw Moshe from the motor pool. He was sitting on the ground. I walked towards him. He looked up at me. I said, "That's enough for me. I need to get outside for some.

I stood by the side of the motor pool.

bright within. I could easily guess the location of the checkpost by the forest, where the road made its first sharp curve on the way to the quarry. Beyond the road, it was possible to see the outlines of the abandoned orchard, the thin limbs of the bare almond trees and the slender branches of the lone poplar. All this was real. It was no dream. This was truly happening. I stood bundled in layers of wool and cloth against the damp and the cold. The dumbstruck men still sat on the other side of the thin wall. Only after I left did they begin to understand the tragedy we had all escaped. I was wracked by the urge for a smoke.

What was it about Shuka Mashiah that so inflamed Franco the driver and Moshe from the motor pool? What was it that even the petite clerk in the law office bore him a grudge? Was he indeed an inveterate liar or did he merely affect the look of a crook? Did the lust for filthy lucre make his head spin and draw him into shameless, transparent lies? Until then, I had never met a real impostor. Here and there, I had heard stories, but I had never lived with him at close quarters, cheek to jowl, one bed next to the other. Is that how a real impostor looks? As we stood in Bnei Brak early that afternoon, he seemed so well-mannered, polite and gentle at the cafe table, so fastidious and extremely eager to be of help. He showed himself a smooth talker there. How clear everything became when he dissected the fine print. "The contracts are not hard," he smiled, "it is the clients who are hard." What, indeed, was he, a failed student of the law? An exam cheater caught and expelled from the university? Someone who had bought his legal degree by correspondence? They knew him for what he was at the law office and still willingly took him in. But in wartime, they were glad to see any mobilized soldier home on a short leave, even if he was but a lowly messenger boy.

The guard on duty stopped when he came upon me on his rounds. I begged him for a cigarette but he had only pecan nuts he chewed, sent by his wife from the farm. I took some of the pecans. At first, I found them difficult to crack. I was still jittery and my fingers would not obey me. He showed me the easy way to split them and their slightly bitter taste calmed me down. I told him what had happened in the shack. He had heard nothing outside besides the usual shouts, which gave him no cause at all for suspicion.

Anyway, what did he care what happened to that sleek platoon clerk of ours? "He got what was coming to him," the guard said. "I saw how he wallowed in the snow. Don't take pity on him. Too bad the boys didn't give him a fat snow ball between the legs."

"I was with him today in Bnei Brak," I said.

"So what's the problem?" asked the guard. "Give me a good car and I can make the trip there in less than three hours."

"Yes," I said, "but it's what we saw on the way. This country has gone crazy. Nothing has changed."

The guard said, "Look, the war will hardly be over before everyone goes back to his little schemes. Jews, what do you want. The war hasn't ended yet and the Jews are already cheating one another. Look at our impostor. That dandy isn't worth spit," said the guard, "it's really a shame to get excited over him. I'm just sorry the boys didn't jam his ass with snow."

I returned to the shack. It suddenly felt cold. The fever that had gripped me after the attempted shooting was gone. The nuts grated on my teeth and their bitter taste calmed me down. I no

longer hungered so painfully for a cigarette. Inside, too, tempers had cooled. The men busied themselves, a night like any other at the post. They read the newspaper, played backgammon, made love to the telephone. Shuka Mashiah was one of those waiting in a seat for the phone. When he began to talk with the woman in Tiberias, the unit erupted with him in shouts of joy. "How are you, my little darling? How was your day?" All the listeners lost their hearts to his beautiful, innocent *divorcelah*. They clung to the phone cord, sent her their warmest regards and swore like merry sailors. Shuka was warned that if he pushed them back and didn't let them eavesdrop on his sweet nothings, they would drown him again in a bath of snow outside. "Don't listen to them," he shouted to her through the tumult. "They're just sick, starving soldiers." And they yelled to her, the way street urchins years ago harassed necking couples, "Don't believe him like a fool. He's lying to you again through his teeth. Don't believe him."

#### IV.

When we arrived at Bnei Brak at long last, Shuka Mashiah took his time instead of hurrying us to his law offices. He led us through narrow, winding streets on the edge of town. Moshe from the motor pool was fidgety and hostile and I feared that he would soon explode and fall on Shuka right in the car. I sat between them in the back seat. For some reason, it was my fate to be a witness to the machinations of Shuka Mashiah. I did not volunteer but neither did I refuse when the men proposed that I go down to Bnei Brak with the two litigants. "You don't have to do a thing," they told me. "You just have to play the part of an arbitrator." I thought, what could be bad about such a trip in the midst of the war? Perhaps it even harbored some good. It would be pleasant to descend from the cold, dry heights to the cozy, caressing lap of the wintry coastal plain. After the dark mole's life we led in the bunkers, it would be nice to go back and see the routine of city living. To feel again the simple courtesy of civilian passersby, to hear the calls of parents and the joyful squeals of children in the parks, that too would be soothing. It was a pleasure to read the bright-colored entrance signs to parking lots and office buildings. What I loathed were grey tin signs with strange place names and code words for assembly points carelessly daubed.

During the ride, a philosophical discussion, profound yet strained and irritating, was conducted in the car. Yehoshua Mashiah argued that now, after the jarring shock of the war, what was needed was a policy of letting bygones be bygones and wiping the slate clean. Whoever had fought, whoever had taken part in the battles, needed to erase all trace of his criminal file, whether it was in the hands of the police or buried in other bureaus. Whoever had been called up during these oppressive months, whoever was ready to risk his life on the battlefield, deserved expunction of whatever petty offenses were attributed to him. He was entitled, perhaps even obliged, to start life anew without the hobbling fear that his charge sheet would trail him forever. We had seen what the old ways had brought us to. Yes, he was prepared to confess that he behaved more than once before the war with galling impudence. Many had acted that way. That was the atmosphere that prevailed among the people he knew. If he were to repent, he would not be alone in that. He was willing to join in a mass wave of repentance. After all, what was he in the final analysis? An insignificant lawyer struggling to make a living? What was he compared to the monstrous liars and cheats who overran the land? What was he compared to the nouveau riches? What was he compared to the contractors who had built the Bar Lev line?

Moshe from the motor pool squirmed in his seat with silent rage. I sensed that he did not believe a single word that left Shuka's lips. What was this, letting bygones be bygones? Why suddenly

this proposal for wiping the slate clean? What reward did criminals deserve? Those who were lawbreakers before the war remained so afterwards. Worse, they were clever, swift to learn their lessons. Someone who was a small time thief before the battles became a major felon after the truce. What hypocrisy was this? Just where had Shuka acquired the piety he now assumed? With our own eyes, we had seen how much injustice the war brought. The good were punished as usual, and how! They were the first to fall, they died in droves. They lost their money and were forced to close their businesses while the wicked, those who had brought all this on us, they alone profited from the disaster.

"Watch them slinking, one by one, from their holes. How quickly they hid when the battles started. Now you can find them everywhere, continuing what they began, even piling new sins on old crimes. They put on airs, thumb their noses at the law and honest, hardworking people, and cheat just as they always have."

Partly to cool tempers and partly to stem the violent tide of tension flooding the car, I shifted the conversation in another direction. I announced that I had heard an intriguing rumor circulating in the battalion about a senior officer who was popular in the police command. In fact, he was beloved wherever he went. Why? Because he was one of the surviving heroes of the war of independence. Though he was quite old now and no longer knew what he was doing, everyone showed him respect, especially the veteran soldiers of the battalion. No door in the General Staff was closed to him, there was no minister in this bumbling government whose ear he did not have day, night or the Sabbath. He toured the battalion's pint-sized positions, offering kind words to the soldiers. They had been called up in the first days and felt unjustly abandoned and betrayed, one might say deceived and deluded.

In each outpost, a small celebration was prepared in his honor. The men served up a cooked meal for him just the way he liked it, piping hot bean soup seasoned with a spicy tomato sauce. The moment he sat on the rough wooden bench and slurped the broth, the world around him utterly ceased to exist. He did not speak or reply to pointed questions. He did not even laugh at the crude jokes for which, it was well-known, he had long had a soft spot.

His spirits rose after the meal. He went up to Tel Ha'afar, below the observation post. From there, he bestowed his scintillating comments on the frozen, bundled boys seated at his feet. "In 1948, what do you know, we set out for dreadful battles each night. Night after night, more than 20 times a month. Do you understand what that means? Every second man was wounded. Each soldier knew that if a bullet missed him that night, it would strike down his best buddy." The boys sat in silence. They had long since grown accustomed to his sprays of saliva as he trembled in hollow enthusiasm. Some chuckled, others interrupted him with catcalls. "Where was our vaunted intelligence? Why weren't the reserves called up? For god's sake, who is responsible for this catastrophe? But everyone knows that this is a game. The rules are known and the play ordained. It is all carried on with comradely warmth. The aged officer is already very ill. The battalion whispers that his days are numbered. There are agonizing, sleepless nights when he prays to the gods of war to let him fall in battle, if only by a stray burst of fire or a defective shell. Anything, so long as he doesn't die in the hospital bed that awaits him. But each such visit, every flyspeck of an outpost, extends his life. He is grateful for his fate and the soldiers at his feet.

The instant he concludes his remarks, wretched soldiers pounce on him seeking favors. Support



them with interest-free loans; grant them special bonuses; grease their way with recommendations of one sort or another; plead their case with the top brass, who know him as one of their own. He swells with emotion and fatherly pride. He embraces each of them, shakes their hands, jots their names in his distinctive shorthand into the famous notebook. He promises one and all that he shall fulfill their requests. "You deserve it," he placates them, and instills in them serene confidence and a warrior's pride. "You alone are the mighty pillar on which the nation has leaned in these dark days." Even when his brief visit to the post is over and he rushes to his car, lone soldiers, those who have special requests, surround him. Everyone in the battalion knows the meaning of special problems that cannot be heard out in public. These need privacy, a whisper befits them. We are speaking here of wiping the slate clean of minor criminal offenses, infractions committed rashly and in the folly of youth during the squandered years before the war. No one imagines that things will turn out this way. They are all but grist for the rumor mill.

Rumor now had it that, apart from the official pardon the president granted those convicted of serious crimes, a flurry of pardons for minor offenses was now sweeping the country. It was some sort of clandestine dealing between the senior staff officers of the army and the police. Amnesty would be granted to anyone who had fought in battle, for he had atoned for his sin. Now nothing remained but to assure that the bureaucracies knew of the expunctions, that the papers would be destroyed and the files buried. By the grace of god, everyone's clock would be turned back.

Shuka Mashiah listened gravely to what I had said while Moshe from the motor pool fidgeted uncomfortably in his seat. It was difficult for them to discern from my words whether I had reported the truth or was merely mocking the great man and our battalion and the remorse awakened in the nation during these days of war. For the few minutes until we arrived at door of the law office, a bewildered silence prevailed in the car.

V.

Snow covered the dark basalt rocks for nearly a full week, then gave them a brighter look as it slowly melted. Rivulets of melted snow trickled among the stones and the black jackdaws roosting in the abandoned orchard took off for the horizon. Heavy vehicles again made their way to the quarry at the peak of the hill. The great tractors returned to their work and tufa dust rose from the excavations. Then the Syrian guns, too, renewed their damned morning bombardments.

For a little while, the boys mistakenly had thought the pleasant calm would never end and rushed to bring their private cars to the post. Now they moved the cars in a panic out of range of the cannons. The entrance to the deserted bunker was cleared and heaters brought inside. We spent long hours there each day. Shuka Mashiah disappeared from the shack for some days and the boys didn't miss him a bit. On the contrary, they rejoiced at his misfortune. They said he had been summoned to battalion headquarters for an extraordinary investigation into the discovery that the platoon's adjutant had forged documents. Suspicion had fallen on him. But their celebration of sweet revenge proved premature, for he returned a few days later. All the malicious rumors - that he had gone to clear his name and see that his file got "lost" - were baseless.

Then, one morning just after the dreaded shelling of the bunker, while the haze of blazing shrapnel still hovered over the puddles, his *divorcelah* appeared. She was as lovely and innocent

as she sounded over the phone, the little darling from Tiberias. She stopped her small car in the empty parking lot. The stunned boys instantly gathered around her.

"Where can I find the lawyer Shuka Mashiah?" she asked, starting from the car. She wore a heavy old army skirt. Stung by the biting cold, she breathed aloud and her hands were numb.

"Shuka's in the office," they answered. But it was by no means certain that he was a lawyer. That was a matter yet to be finally confirmed.

"Where is the office?" the little darling asked. "In that shack?"

"No, he was moved to the bunker when the shelling started again. Be careful as you go up the slippery path to the bunker. It's muddy and littered with rocks. Beware of whatever he says. If I were in your place, I wouldn't believe a single word."

The indifferent platoon commander was called from his lair and emerged from the shack blinded by the sun's bright light. "You're crazy," he bellowed at the young woman. "Who gave you permission to pass the checkpoints? All positions are on full alert and the shellings can start again at any moment. I have specific orders." She pulled woolen army gloves from her fingers and quietly explained that Shuka had instructed her before the trip how to outwit the checkpoint guards. He hadn't told her that orders barred civilians from the line positions. In fact, the soldiers at each point had let her through without hindrance and even wished her success. Only here, by the warped tin sign at the bend below the quarry, had some rude guards, attempting an inspection, insisted on seeing her pass and pawed her papers. But she had learned a few tricks from Shuka. Dear Shuka, helping her even when he was not at her side. Now she must see him right away. She had an urgent problem that would not brook any delay.

The listless platoon commander was perplexed. On the one hand, he wanted the young woman removed at once, escorted by a car assigned to make sure she went back down to the junction. On the other, if her heart was set and she had already taken the risk to get this far, perhaps it really would be better for her to see Shuka. Maybe they really did have compelling business. As the weeks went by, and their stinking time in the trenches dragged on, the men's pressing problems multiplied. He had no doubt that everyone by now loathed their depressing, inescapable situation. The endless war weighed heavily on us all. He relented and allowed her to enter the office.

She trod the muddy ground leading to the bunker. It was the very spot on which the boys had tripped Shuka, laid him in the snow, stripped him and crammed snow between his legs. Here he had screamed in pain and here they had packed ice on his groin. This was where Franco the driver had tormented him and flung him after their fleeting fist fight. When he fell, his toiletries had sunk into the snow. Now that the snow had melted, one could smell their odors. The scents permeated the mud. When the wild wind momentarily ceased to blow, and the smoke from the generator shifted the other way, it was possible to hug the cold earth and inhale the sweet perfume rising from the dough of muck. Rubbed raw by the snow, his pink body had reddened while his fair, thinning hair gently bobbed beneath the lumps of snow splattered on his head.

So astounded were we all by the rapidity with which events then occurred that I was barely able to follow their precise course. Trailed by the little darling, Shuka Mashiah burst from the bunker. He was forcibly pulling the young divorced woman behind him. She struggled to break his grip

and show him the papers in her hand, but he was possessed by a devilish rage, red all over, without the jacket forgotten in his office, sweat glistening on his angry face. They fell and rose, rolled in the mud and rose again entwined in both wrath and desire. As they passed us, Shuka called to the platoon commander, "I have to take this crazy woman back to Tiberias."

"Very good," the platoon commander shouted so he could be heard. "You're saving me some trouble."

"Don't worry," Shuka went on, "I'll be right back. There's no need for an escort." Then to her: "What an imbecile you are. Who told you to sign the papers without me? You idiot, why didn't you first check out who the property belonged to?"

The young woman fixed us with terrified, apologetic eyes. She was helplessly dragged behind him, stumbling over every pebble. "Where did you hide the keys?" Shuka roared at her. "Give me your purse." He brusquely snatched her handbag. "Give me these too," he insisted, and grabbed the sheaf of papers. "You can throw these forged papers to the winds. I'll prove to them that you were insane when you signed." He opened the car door and pushed the befuddled little darling inside. He threw her purse after her and locked the door. "If that's what you want, I'll prove that you were out of your mind. How did you get here, peabrain? You're crazy, who drives into a bombardment? And who promised you the rent money? And why didn't an idiot like you first check out who the damned lot belonged to?"

As he maneuvered on the parking lot, he shouted to us, "I left everything on the desk in the bunker, the duty roster and the guard shift rotations. Just don't make a hopeless mess of everything for me." Through the tiny windows of the departing car, we saw the innocent beauty from Tiberias sagging limp against her beloved. He must have dealt her a sharp, furtive jab of his elbow, for her face contorted with pain and she lurched back in her seat. We could only guess at how he cursed her in his rage and wailed in his self-righteous voice, "How did I ever get mixed up with you?" To himself, he surely whispered through teeth gritted in fury, "'Fear not, my servant, O worm Jacob, we have saved a worthy crumb of the cake of war for you too.' What a fool you are, you've worried for nothing. It is not the war that will cut short your life but this lunatic at your side, the innocent, unfortunate woman from Tiberias."

## VI.

I could not prevent any of it. I simply was unable to do a thing, either to stop events from taking their inevitable course or to divert the inexorable flow in which these events hurtled past one another. I sat myself down at the little outpost on the high peak of the hill, deep in the enclave captured from the Syrians. From my lofty perch, I observed the yellow bulldozers biting into the veins of tufa in the quarry below. Exposed beneath the receding snow were remnants of the terrible battle fought for conquest of the hill. When had that been? How many months had passed since then? To me, it seemed not months but years. Torn coats dotted the defensive trenches now abandoned and clogged with cascades of earth. Odd bits of personal equipment left by the Syrian soldiers lay scattered on the ground. Chinese hand grenades were strewn around shattered entrenching tools. Every scrap imaginable had been swept into the shallow ditches. Wherever one looked, shell fragments were rusting among the crocuses.

And what could I have done if Shuka the impostor had aroused some small measure of

compassion? Could I have found him on my own? Could I have stopped him by myself and stayed his swindler's hand? Could I alone have marched him to the judge advocate's chambers and said a few words on his behalf? Had anyone asked for my opinion? Besides, he had disappeared after returning the little darling, and not even this mighty colossus of an army could discover where he had gone to ground. It was as though he knew that the summons to an official inquiry awaited him on his return. He did not report and since then had held the dubious status of AWOL.

The platoon commander gave up on him after a week and went down to the battalion adjutant. Among other matters, he reported Shuka Mashiah's absence. Moshe from the motor pool and Franco the driver, fearing that he would be too lethargic to follow through on a complaint, volunteered to go with him. They wanted to help with the report and inundate the military police investigators with tales of Shuka's crimes. Had these two met Shuka on their way down, lying wounded by the side of the road from a surprise artillery attack, they would not have lifted a finger to save him. He disgusted them, pure and simple. They would let him howl in the ditch until he died, just to stop him from maligning them.

They returned that evening, tired from the long trip. The platoon commander was weary and did not want to repeat everything he had learned down there. He said only that he had given a report on Shuka. To his surprise, the adjutant's office already knew the name. They knew of his scams and were waiting only for a complaint that would stand up in court. From an anonymous source, the battalion adjutant had received detailed, nearly comprehensive tips about his earlier swindles as a civilian in the cities where he had properties in Gush Dan and complaints from women he had cheated. But the senior officer, the favorite of the enlisted men, had faltered and failed to complete his investigation. He could not surmount the obstacles he encountered in tracking Shuka's amazing flim-flams.

Shuka was accused of a host of crimes. He had defrauded the innocent and deceived the foolish, posed as a notary and drafted false documents. He had once even impersonated a building contractor and sold fictitious apartments. But there was always someone who felt cheated and immediately lodged a complaint. The description of his features grew more accurate with each report. His ruddy skin was noted again and again, as were his light, thinning hair and even the ever-present scent of his ointments. Most of his crimes consisted of conning divorced and abandoned women into bogus real estate deals. It was amazing how they fell into his traps time after time. They gladly placed in his hands small plots they had inherited, little apartments bought with their last cent and sums of money put aside for a rainy day.

Our platoon commander lost his temper this time and added his modest account to the statements in the file. "I needed to take you," he said, "not those two hotheads. They got excited right away, they babbled, they became unruly and had no telltale details to add. You would have described him better. You slept in the bed next to his for months. You saw him rolling naked in the snow each morning. Whether you liked it or not, you heard his endless telephone conversations with the innocent *divorcelah* from Tiberias."

"But I might have forgotten all that on purpose," I said. "Maybe I would suddenly have felt sorry and asked myself, 'Why should I turn in this poor fellow?'" What's more, he had never done me wrong. Anyway, the Bnei Brak detectives were on his trail, joined now by the military police. And how could I have been of help? I did know him well. He was no hero. We all had seen how

Franco the driver sent him flying into the snow with the first punch.

But his two ardent antagonists swore before the platoon to find him and take vengeance. Now they had permission from every police department in the world, now they were certain he was indeed a wanted criminal and not merely a noxious amateur. Even the big-hearted officer, who did right by the common soldiers over the heads of their commanders, had failed, his indictment gone uncharged. Shuka's blood was fair game, a man hunt had to be launched at once. Take him alive. Yank him by their own fingers from the rat hole he had scurried down. They swore before us to tear him limb from limb. They would flay him to the last sinew until no sign remained that he had once been a man. They would clean out his pockets, leave him without so much as a coin, and compel him, dead or alive, to pay the debt he owed his victims.

Moshe from the motor pool turned indignantly to me in his new-found insolence. Had I not interfered in the violent quarrel that broke out in the shack and cast the magazine from the cocked Uzi, justice would have been done long ago to that filthy impostor. Whoever protected the wicked in the end was tainted himself. I would have to feel for myself, with those refined sensibilities of which I bragged, that this dandy, this scented paper-worm, this coddled bachelor, was nothing but a wanted criminal. The war had not purged the guilty. The nights spent waiting in ambush would not shave even a hair from his due punishment.

But I could not have prevented anything, not the fate that was Shuka Mashiah's and not the suffering inflicted on the poor *divorcelah*. When the revenge-hungry boys fell on the telephone and dialed her little apartment, I could not stop them from pouring out their wrath on her. They cursed her and swore foul oaths in her ears until I could bear it no longer and left the shack. I remembered how this small woman had managed to pass every army roadblock. I remembered how she had shriveled in the fierce cold that gripped the hill. But I had failed to block her path to the bunker and the makeshift platoon office. I had failed to save her from the hurtful hands of her beloved, who treated her like a hostage, not a sweetheart. Yes, I was obliged to make amends for my inability to shift events from the course set for them long before.

## VII.

Only later did I learn the full story of the hunt for revenge. It was some days before I found out that they had gone straight to Bnei Brak and immediately located the law office. The astonished secretary who met them said that it had never occurred to her that he was an impostor. He had never been registered as a lawyer. With some difficulty, he had served as an assistant in the office, a sort of a messenger boy. She knew he had printed up elegant business cards and exquisite stationery. She knew of his knack for mimicking the measured language of the lawyers in the office. Now and then, she had peeked into private papers not intended for her eyes. But she had considered all this a big joke.

When they asked her for his address, she gave them a number of listings scattered in the office's nooks and crannies. They diligently and methodically checked these out, one after another. Late in the afternoon, they arrived at the little neighborhood at the edge of the developed section of Bnei Brak, not far from the orange groves. Frogs croaked in the sea of stagnant puddles around them. Gray crows circled above the open ground. One could easily see the tree trunks, the rusting iron gates, the blue-tinged hills in the distance. The train rumbled as it passed close overhead. Its whistle rattled the roofs of the quarter's humbles homes and falling soot coated the sidewalks

below.

In silence, they climbed the steps and blocked all the doors to the building. They closed in on him like an animal caught in a trap. Only afterwards was I informed how they broke inside and surprised him in his sleep, how they rushed forward and overpowered him without a glance at the young woman in his bed. They were polite to her, however, made no threats and let her go. They didn't even ask for her name. "You don't know this criminal," they said. "After we settle our score with him, we'll explain everything." Then, and only then, they collected the debt he owed.

I later learned that the men of the platoon lingered several days exacting it. He had promised Moshe from the motor pool a cheap apartment, for which he received a sizeable payment. To Franco the driver he had promised a small parcel of land next to his house outside the city. Franco had been helplessly confused by the stack of papers Shuka induced him to sign.

How did they collect the debt? That is a silly question. They roused him in a daze from his sleep; on his knees, he signed a release for each of them. They sprained his ankles, and he gave back all their money. They thrashed his back, and he swore never to cheat anyone again. And finally, when he thought they were finally done with him, the revenge seekers, still unsatisfied, came at him again and made him crawl back and forth on his belly through the festering puddles.

Even the battalion adjutant's office did not know who had called the Bnei Brak police. They found it hard to explain how he had turned up, sick and feverish, at the jail or how the report had arrived at battalion headquarters directing them to come quickly to secure his release. "It's wartime," the police shouted. "Who needs worthless parasites shirking their duty here?" The kindly officer who had survived the bloody nights of the war of independence personally went to help return him to the battalion. "We don't abandon a soldier," he faintly whispered in his escort's ear, "even if he is a bit of a stinker." But even his appearance was of no use. Shuka Mashiah, the impostor from Bnei Brak, remained in jail.

I could not prevent his pious neighbors from crowding his door when the police arrived to take him into custody. Nor could I stop them from blessing him. Was it one of them one had called in the tip? "Fear not, O worm Jacob, what did we tell you? No need to rush. The Lord looks after all men. Neither shall he diminish your lot. Just as you won the crumbs of the cake of war, so you shall the crumbs of the judges' justice." They whispered to him in secret, as though concealing notes in his clothes for the long trip, "Go, go. He who protected you there will protect you also inside the walls."

The months after that passed quickly. I even failed to keep up with the newspapers. Had they covered his trial in the breathless police blotter columns? Had they named all his victims? Did he actually get his charges quashed? I was not called to testify. No one cared for my thoughts. And then I met troubles of my own and lacked the time even to ask the men of the platoon if he had conned the judges. Had he succeeded in having the slate wiped clean? When all was said and done, had the beautiful, innocent divorcee from Tiberias forgiven him?