A Perfect Peace

Amos Oz

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About the Book

‘One day a man may just pick up and walk out. What he leaves behind stays behind. What’s left behind has nothing to stare at but his back.’

In the winter of 1965, Yonaton Lifshitz decided to leave the kibbutz on which he was born, and his sterile marriage, to start a new life. But as he engineers his escape, the arrival of Azariah Gitlin, a keen new recruit, brings about a painful reconciliation of their different destinies in a society struggling with changing realities.

About the Author

Born in Jerusalem in 1939, Amos Oz is the internationally acclaimed author of many novels and essay collections, translated into thirty languages. His novels include *My Michael, Black Box, To Know a Woman* and his most recent book is his memoir *A Tale of Love and Darkness.* He has received several international awards, including the Prix Fémina, the Israel Prize and the Frankfurt Peace Prize. He lectures in literature at the Ben Gurion University of the Negev. He is married with two daughters and a son, and lives in Arad, Israel.

ALSO BY AMOS OZ

Fiction

My Michael
Elsewhere, Perhaps
Touch the Water, Touch the Wind
Unto Death
The Hill of Evil Counsel
Where the Jackals Howl
Black Box
To Know a Woman
Fima
Don't Call it Night
Panther in the Basement
The Same Sea

Non-Fiction

In the Land of Israel
The Slopes of Lebanon
Under this Blazing Light
Israel, Palestine & Peace
Help Us to Divorce: Israel & Palestine: Between Right and Right
A Tale of Love and Darkness

For Children

Soumchi

Amos Oz

A Perfect Peace

TRANSLATED BY
Hillel Halkin

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Part 1

W*inter*

1

One day a man may just pick up and walk out. What he leaves behind stays behind. What's left behind has nothing to stare at but his back. In the winter of 1965 Yonatan Lifshitz decided to leave his wife and the kibbutz on which he had been born and raised. He had finally made up his mind to run away and start a new life.

All through his childhood and adolescence, and for all his years in the army, he had been hemmed in by a tight little circle of men and women who had been interfering every step of the way. He had begun to feel they were keeping him from something and that he mustn't let them do it any more. Often, when they sat around talking in their usual way of some "positive development" or "negative phenomenon," he could barely grasp what the words meant. Sometimes when he stood by himself at a window toward the close of day to watch the birds fly off into the twilight, he calmly accepted the certainty that these birds will all die in the end. Should an announcer on the evening news speak of "grave indications," he would whisper to himself, So what? If, while taking an afternoon ramble by the burned-out cypress trees at the far end of the kibbutz, he should run into someone who asked what he was doing there, he would say, as if loath to reply, "Oh, I'm just walking around." Yet a moment later he would ask himself, "What *am* I doing here?"

A splendid fellow, they said of him on the kibbutz. If only he weren't such an introvert. But that's the way he is, they said. A sensitive soul.

Now, at twenty-six, of a reserved, or was it pensive, demeanor, he found himself longing to be alone at last, entirely alone, to find for himself what it was all about. There were times he felt his whole life passing by in a clamorous, smoke-filled room where a tedious argument about some bizarre matter dragged endlessly on. He neither knew what this argument was about nor wished to take part in it. The only thing he wanted was to pick up and walk out, to go someplace else, a place where he was waited for—and would not be waited for forever. Benya Trotsky—whom Yonatan had never seen, not even in a photograph—had run away from the kibbutz and from the country in 1939, six weeks before Yonatan was born. He was a raving theoretician, a fiery student from Kharkov who had chosen to become a conscientious laborer in a stone quarry in the Upper Galilee. Then he lived for a while in our kibbutz, where, against his principles, he fell in love with Hava, Yonatan's mother; he loved her in the most honored Russian fashion—with tears, oaths, and feverish confessions. It was too late, for Hava was already pregnant by Yolek, and had moved into his cabin at the far end of the settlement.

One evening, at the end of that winter, after endless complications, letters, threatened suicides, hysterical cries behind the hayloft, group discussions, efforts to find a reasonable solution—after a nervous breakdown and a discreet medical treatment—it came this Trotsky's turn to stand guard duty. Armed with the kibbutz's antique revolver, he had faithfully watched over us until the break of dawn, when, stricken by ultimate despair, he lay in wait for her in the bushes by the laundry room. Leaping out he fired at her at close range. Then, with the piercing howl of a shot dog, he ran blindly to the cowshed, where he fired twice at Yolek, who was finishing the night milking, and once at Stakhanov, our only bull. With startled kibbutzniks, roused from their beds by the shots, now hot on his heels,

the wretched man dived behind a pile of manure and aimed the last bullet into his own brain.

All those shots had missed their targets, and not a single drop of blood had been shed, yet the lovesick youth fled the kibbutz, and even the country. He ended up a hotel tycoon in Miami Beach, a holiday resort in East America. Once he sent us a large donation for the construction of a music room. At another time he wrote us a letter in a strange Hebrew. In this he aspired, or threatened, or simply volunteered, to be Yonatan Lifshitz's real father.

On the bookshelf in his parents' home, hidden among the pages of an old Hebrew novel, Yonatan had once found a biblical-sounding love poem on a yellowing sheet of paper, apparently composed by this same Benyamin Trotsky. The lover in the poem though was called Eleazar of Maresha and his beloved Azuva daughter of Shilhi. It was entitled "But Their Hearts Were Not True." At the bottom of the page a few words were penciled in a round, untroubled handwriting. But Yonatan could not decipher those words because the letters were Cyrillic.

Never in all the years had his parents so much as mentioned the B. T. affair in his presence. Except once, during a fierce quarrel, Yolek had said to Hava in Polish, *"Twój komediant,"* and she had hissed at him:

"Ty zboju. Ty morderco." ("You crook. You murderer.")

The whole thing was incredible, the old-timers on the kibbutz sometimes recalled. From a range of just two or three feet, that joker, he managed to miss a bull!

Yonatan was trying to imagine some different place, a place suitable for him, some way of working and resting just as he pleased, away from ever being encircled again.

His plan was to go far away, as far as he could get, to a place as different as it could be from the kibbutz, from the youth camps, from desert bivouacs, from the long lines of hitchhiking soldiers at road junctions blasted by hot dry

winds and the stench of thistles, sweat, dust, and dried urine. Perhaps a strange, truly big city, with a river, with bridges, and towers, and tunnels, and fountains with monstrous gargoyles spouting water—fountains nightly fingered by a rare, electric light, where a lonely woman might be standing, her face turned to the light of the water and her back to a square paved with cobblestones. A faraway place where anything is possible—love, danger, arcane encounters, sudden conquests.

He fancied himself stalking with the light tread of a young jungle-cat the carpeted corridors of a cold, tall building, pushing past doormen into elevators whose ceilings glowed with round eyes, carried along in a stream of strangers, all intent on their own affairs, each utterly alone, his own face as inscrutable as theirs.

And so he had the idea of going overseas to study while working at some odd job, as a night watchman, say, or an attendant, or even a courier such as he had seen advertised for in a brief notice in the *Help Wanted* column of the newspaper. Not that he had the vaguest notion of what a courier might do, but something told him nonetheless, that's for you, friend. He imagined himself at the controls of the latest machines, before instrument panels and blinking lights, surrounded by determined men and cunning women. By himself at last, in a rented room high up in a skyscraper in some foreign city—no doubt in America; no doubt in the Middle West of the movies, where he would spend his nights preparing for entrance exams, acquiring a profession that would set him out on the high road to life itself. And then on to the place where he was waited for, and would not be waited for forever.

At the end of that autumn Yonatan got up the courage to hint of his plans to his father.

Though it was Yolek, in his capacity as secretary of the kibbutz, who initiated the conversation. Early one evening

he cornered his son at the foot of the stone stairs leading up to the recreation hall and urged him to take over the management of the tractor shed.

Yolek spoke in a low, secretive voice. A moist breeze blew over them. The evening light was clouded, the light between one rain and the next. A sodden bench was covered with wet walnut leaves. Wet walnut leaves had already buried a broken sprinkler and a pile of burlap sacks. Yolek was a broadly built man. From the shoulders down he was drawn in rough, straight lines, like a heavy packing crate, but his gray unhealthy face, with its scattered pouches of wasted skin, looked more like an aging philanderer's than a principled old socialist's. Whereas Yonatan was tall, thin, and slightly distracted-looking. He stubbornly kept his eyes on the bench, the buried sacks, and the broken sprinkler. Suddenly, in a low, rapid voice, he burst into a torrent of speech.

No! Absolutely not! He didn't even want to hear about it. Running the tractor shed was not for him. He had work in the citrus groves and there was still the grapefruit to get in. "When it stops raining, I mean. Today, of course, we couldn't pick, but as soon as it clears we'll start again. And besides, the tractor shed—what do I have to do with tractors?"

"That's something totally new," said Yolek. "Nowadays no one wants to work in the tractor shed. Mazel tov. Some years ago we had fierce battles around here because everybody wanted to be nothing less than a mechanic, and now suddenly working with nuts and bolts is beneath all of you. Scyths! Huns! Tatars! I don't mean *you* personally. I'm talking in general. Look at your young Labor Party hacks. Look at your young littérateurs. Never mind. All I ask is that you take over the shed for as long as it takes to find a permanent solution. And if I ask such a favor from you, I expect you to give me better reasons for refusing than just sobs."

“Look,” said Yonatan, “look, I simply don’t feel I’m right for it.”

“Not right for it!” said Yolek. “You do feel, you don’t feel, you’re right, you’re not right—what is this here, a drama ensemble? Are we a bunch of actors trying to decide who’s going to play Boris Godunov here? Tell me, once and for all, will you, what this is all about with you people—the *right* person, the *wrong* person, all this spoiled, capricious nonsense of self-fulfillment, or whatever the hell you call it. What’s being the right or wrong person got to do with work, eh?”

“Look, I’m just saying that it’s not for me,” said Yonatan. “What good does it do to get angry? I’m not made for that kind of work, and that’s it. Besides, I’m having second thoughts about my future altogether. And here you are, arguing about young Labor Party politicians while we’re both getting soaked. See, it’s raining again.”

Which wasn’t what Yolek heard him say. Or perhaps he heard correctly and preferred to back off. At any rate, he replied: “Right then. Sleep on it and give me a yes or no. No point standing here arguing all night with the rain pouring down on our heads. And speaking of heads, you ought to get a haircut.”

One Saturday, when Yonatan’s younger brother Amos was home on a short leave from the army, Yonatan snapped at him:

“Why talk so much about next year? You have no way of knowing where you’ll be a year from now. And neither do I.”

To his wife Rimona he said: “Do you think I need a haircut?”

Rimona took a long look at him. With a diffident, delayed-action smile as though she had been asked a delicate or even dangerous question, she replied: “You look nice with long hair, but if it bothers you, that’s different.”

“Nonsense,” said Yonatan.

It saddened him to have to part with the smells, sounds, and colors he had known since childhood. He loved the fragrance of evening as it slowly descended in the last days of summer over the newly mowed lawn—across which, by the oleander bushes, three mutts would be fighting furiously for the remains of a torn shoe. Some old pioneer in a peaked worker’s cap would be standing on the path, reading a newspaper, his lips moving as if in prayer. An elderly woman carrying a blue bucket with vegetables, eggs, and a fresh loaf of bread would pass the old man by without so much as a nod because of some ancient feud. “Yonatan,” she would say softly, “look at the daisies at the edge of the lawn. They’re so white and clean, just like the snow that fell every winter back in Lupatyn.” And the sound of a recorder from the children’s house would mingle with the cries of birds, while in the distance to the west, beyond the citrus trees, beyond the setting sun, the engine of a passing freight train would bleat twice.

Yonatan felt sorry for his parents. For the Sabbath eves and the holidays when the men, women, and children, nearly all dressed in their very best, freshly ironed white shirts and blouses, assembled in the recreation hall to sing the old songs. For the tin shed in the citrus groves where he sometimes stole twenty minutes from work to browse in the sports pages. For Rimona. For the sun coming up like a bloodbath at five on a summer morning, behind the rocky hills to the east above the ruins of the abandoned Arab village of Sheikh Dahr. For the Saturday hikes among those hills and ruins—he and Rimona, Rimona and he with Udi and Anat, or sometimes just he alone.

In bed at night, unable to sleep, Yonatan thought that whatever was waiting for him must be wondering where he was and would, if he didn’t hurry, move on without him. In

the morning, he padded out to the porch barefoot and in his underwear, to put on his work clothes and mud-caked boots, one of which had yawned open a few days before, its laughing mouth full of rusty nails. Over the frozen screams of the birds he heard himself being paged to pick up and go, not to the grapefruit grove, but to some wholly different place, a place that would be the right place because it would be his own. He had better not be late.

Day by day he could feel something fading in him. Was it illness? Sleeplessness? Sometimes, of their own accord, his lips would murmur: Enough. That's it. Finished.

All the beliefs and ideas that they had instilled in him since childhood had shriveled. Rather, they had simply paled away in his heart. If they discussed at a general kibbutz meeting repeated violations of the egalitarian ethic, or the need for collective authority, or even for plain honesty, Yonatan, sitting by himself at the farthest table in the dining room, behind the southernmost column, would sketch naval destroyers on the paper napkins. If the discussion turned into a particularly long one, he would proceed to aircraft carriers, ships he had never seen except in the movies and illustrated magazines. Whenever he read in the paper of the growing threat of war, he would say to Rimona, nonsense, that's all these idiots ever do, and turn to the sports section.

Shortly before the high holidays he resigned from the Youth Committee. Ideas and opinions seemed to fade away. A sadness rose and fell like the wail of a siren, though even when it fell, as it sometimes did at work or during a chess game, he could feel it pierce him like a foreign body in his heart, in his throat, in his chest, in his gut, just as when he was small and did something bad and wasn't caught or punished but still he shook with fear all day long and at night in bed in the dark staying up till all hours—you crazy fool, you, what have you done?

Yonatan longed to get far away from this grief like those rich people in books, in Europe, who fled to snow-covered mountains to escape the summer heat or to the warm south to cheat the winter. Once, when the two of them were unloading sacks of fertilizer from a truck, he said to his friend Udi:

"Hey, Udi, what's the biggest fraud in the world?"

"Those meatballs Fayga cooks for lunch three times a week. Nothing but stale bread with a little meat seasoning."

"No," Yonatan persisted. "I mean really. The most colossal fraud there ever was."

"All right," said Udi unenthusiastically. "I guess it's religion. Or communism. Or both."

"No," said Yonatan. "It's the stories we were told when we were children."

"Stories?" marveled Udi. "What in the world made you think of that?"

"They were the exact opposite of life, that's what they were—got any matches, Udi? Remember that time, that commando raid on the Syrians in Nukeib, how we left a dead Syrian soldier with half his body shot away in a jeep and put his hands on the wheel and stuck a lit cigarette in his mouth and took off? You remember that?"

Udi took his time answering. He dragged a sack off the truck, carefully squared it off to form the base for a new pile. Then, exhaling, scratching himself, he turned around to look at Yonatan, who was leaning against the side of the truck, smoking. Udi laughed.

"What are you doing? Philosophizing on me in broad daylight?"

"Nonsense," said Yonatan. "I was thinking of a dirty little book I once read in English about what the seven dwarfs really did to Snow White while she was sleeping off the poisoned apple. It was all a fraud, Udi. That, and Hansel and Gretel, and Little Red Riding Hood, and The Emperor's

New Clothes, and all those sweet stories where everybody lived happily ever after. It was all a fraud."

"Talking about fraud, take my matches out of your pocket and give them back. Come on, let's unload the rest of this fertilizer before Etan R. comes along. Only thirty more to go. Take a deep breath."

Yonatan took a deep breath and calmed down.

It was almost a surprise how easy the decision was. The obstacles turned out to be minor. Shaving in front of the mirror, he would whisper:

"He just picked up and left."

The preceding summer, several months before Yonatan made up his mind to leave, a sad thing happened to his wife. Not that Yonatan saw it as a cause for his decision. Words like "cause" or "effect" meant nothing to him. Like those bird migrations Rimona loved to watch every autumn and spring, Yonatan saw his leaving as time running out.

Two years before, Rimona had lost a baby. Then, when she became pregnant again, she was delivered at the end of the summer of a stillborn girl. The doctors advised against her trying again, at least for the time being. But Yonatan no longer wanted to try anyway. All he wanted was to pick up and go.

Now, some three months later, she was borrowing books about Africa from the kibbutz library. Every evening she sat by the table lamp, in the soft, warm brown light cast by its straw shade, copying the details of various tribal rites onto little index cards: hunting rites, rain rites, ghost rites, fertility rites. In her placid hand she entered notations of drumbeats in the villages of Namibia, sketches of Kikuyu witchdoctors' masks, descriptions of Zulu ceremonies for the appeasement of dead ancestors, of medical amulets and incantations from the land of Ubangi-Shari. One day she bought herself a new record in Haifa, on the jacket of

which a naked black warrior was spearing an antelope. In English letters designed to look like campfires, it advertised *The Magic of Chad.*

Meanwhile, the hay was being baled in the fields and brought into the haylofts. The soil was being turned by heavy plows hitched to caterpillar tractors. The white-and-blue flames of summer gave way to a low, gray light. Autumn came and went. The days grew short and bleary-eyed, and the nights grew ever deeper. Yonatan supervised the orange picking, while his friend Udi took care of shipping the harvest.

One evening Udi proposed that over a cup of coffee the two of them review the bills of lading so they could prepare an interim statement.

"What's the rush? The season has just begun." Yonatan was in no mood to budge.

"If you don't have the patience to do the accounting," Udi suggested, "perhaps I should do it myself."

"All right. Fine."

"Don't worry, Yoni. I'll keep you filled in."

"You don't have to."

"What do you mean I don't have to?"

"Listen, Udi. If you'd like to be the boss around here, be the boss." And he left it at that.

He didn't like words and didn't trust them. And so he prepared for the talk with Rimona slowly, deliberately, seeking to anticipate tears, arguments, pleas, accusations. But the more he thought about it, the fewer justifications he could find. Until he was left with none. Not even one.

He had to give Rimona the bold truth. The bold truth might even be expressed in a single sentence. "I can't give in any more," or perhaps just "I'm late."

But Rimona was sure to ask, "Giving in to whom?" or, "Late for what?" What was he going to say then? She might even burst into tears or gasp, "Yoni, you're out of your

mind!” To which he knew he could only mumble, “Sorry,” or, “Well, that’s that,” only to have her turn his parents and the whole kibbutz against him.

Look, Rimona, it’s not something that can be said in words. Maybe it’s like your *Magic of Chad.* Not the magic of Chad. There’s no magic there. Or anywhere. What I mean is, I don’t have a choice, and my back’s against the wall, as they say. So, I’m going.

Yonatan picked an evening several days off. If she started accusing or pleading, he would simply clam up.

All the while, like a member of an underground on the eve of an uprising, he was careful to go about his usual business. At the crack of dawn, he would be out on the porch in his underwear, climbing into his work clothes, conducting a sleepy battle with the laces of his boots—hating the laughing one—wrapping himself in his shabby old battle jacket and heading for the tractor shed. When it rained, he would cover his head and shoulders with a sack and run cursing all the way to the shed. For a couple of minutes he would do push-ups on the filthy concrete floor before checking the oil, fuel, and water in the old gray Ferguson, and try to get its coughing, reluctant engine to turn over so he could take Udi and their crew of teenage girls out to the groves. Gathered around the tin shed to receive their clippers, the girls had dimly brought to Yonatan’s mind some half-forgotten tale of reprobate nuns who had run away from their cloister to consort with a woodsman living in a hut.

Yonatan rarely spoke while working. Once, though, handing the sports section to Udi during a break, he remarked, “All right, if that’s what you want: the bills of lading are yours this year, but keep me in the picture all the same.”

At the end of the day Yonatan would return home, shower, and dress in warm, clean clothes, light the kerosene heater, and sit down with the paper. By four or four-fifteen the winter light would start to dim, but it was twilight by the time Rimona arrived from the laundry and put coffee and cake on the table. Sometimes he would wash the mugs and plates as soon as they finished their coffee. Occasionally, while changing a burned-out light bulb or fixing a leaky shower tap, he might answer a question she asked or listen wearily as she answered one of his.

One evening, on the radio news, a certain Rabbi Nachtigall talked about religious revival. He used the phrase “a desert wasteland and a wilderness.” For the rest of that night, and, indeed, through the next day, Yonatan absentmindedly recited these words as if they were a mantra: The magic of wilderness. The wasteland of Chad. The desert of Chad. The magic of wasteland. Breathe deep, friend, he told himself, and calm down. You’ve got all the time in the world between now and Wednesday.

Tia, his brownish-gray German shepherd, spent the winter days sprawled on the floor by the heater. No longer young, she seemed to suffer from rheumatism in cold weather. In a couple of places her coat had grown threadbare, like a worn-out rug. Sometimes she would open her eyes abruptly and look at him so tenderly that it made him blink. Then she would sink her teeth into her thigh or into her paws to get rid of some invisible pest, and rise with a shake of her coat, which seemed at least a size too large for her. Her ears flattened, she would cross the room and collapse again by the heater, sighing and shutting one eye, although her tail would go on twitching for a moment before it, too, fell silent. Then her other eye would shut, and she would look for all the world as if she were asleep.

Tia developed sores behind her ears, which soon filled with pus, and the veterinarian, who visited the kibbutz

twice a month to check its cows and sheep, had to be consulted. He prescribed a salve and also a white powder that was to be mixed with milk and given her to drink. It was hard to get her to swallow it. He had to postpone it again. From time to time he would go over the words he had prepared for Rimona. But what words? The wasteland of Chad? Picks up and goes?

The winter began to take hold. Yolek came down with the flu and suffered cruel pains in his back. One evening Yonatan dropped by, and Yolek berated him for not visiting more often, for refusing to take over the shed, for the nihilism of Israeli youth in general. Hava interrupted, “You look sad and tired, Yonatan. Maybe you should take a day or two off. Rimona deserves some rest too. Why don’t you two go to Haifa? You can sleep at Uncle Pesach’s and go to a movie.”

“And get a haircut,” added Yolek. “Look at you.”

Whatever you leave behind will stay behind. All those personal effects that you won’t be needing where you’re going. As strange as your room will be without you, as strange and empty as the shelves that you made above your bed, as strange and dusty as the chessboard that you carved all last winter from the trunk of an olive tree, as strange as the garden with its iron poles on which you meant to trellis a grape vine and never did. Fear not. Time will pass. The curtains will fade in the assault of the sun. The magazines at the bottom of the bookcase will turn yellow. The crabgrass and the nettles and the weeds that you fought against all these years will again raise their heads in your backyard. Mildew will flower once more around the sink that you fixed. Plaster will peel. The railings on the porch will rust. Rimona will wait for you until she understands that it’s senseless to wait any longer. Your parents will stubbornly blame her, each other, you, the times, the latest fads, but they too will finally make their

peace. “Mea culpa,” your father will exclaim in his Polish Latin. Your pajamas, your battle jacket, your work clothes, your paratrooper boots will be given away to someone your own size. Not to Udi! Maybe to that hired-hand Italian murderer who works in the metal shop. Other personal belongings will be packed in a suitcase and stored in that little closet above the shower. New routines will strike roots. Rimona will be sent to one of those kibbutz courses in applied art and soon be decorating the dining hall for parties and holidays. Your brother Amos will be discharged from the army and marry his girlfriend Rachel. Maybe he’ll even make the national swimming team. Fear not. Meanwhile you will get to where you are going and see how different, and right, and fresh it all is. And what if ever on some distant day a memory comes to you of an old familiar whiff or the sound of dogs barking far off or a driving hailstorm at dawn and you suddenly fail to grasp what it is you have done, what madness might have possessed you, what devil lured you from your home to the end of the world?

It was raining hard. Orange picking came to a halt. The cheerful teenage girls were sent to the kitchen and the stockrooms. Udi volunteered to fix the tin roof of the cowshed and the sheep pen that had been blown away by the winds. And Yonatan Lifshitz agreed to take over the shed as his father had asked several weeks earlier. “I want you to know that this isn’t a permanent arrangement,” he said. “It’s just for now.”

To which Yolek replied, “Eh? Right! Good. Just get the place into shape, while we catch our breath. Who knows? Maybe you’ll find an unknown source of self-fulfillment there. Maybe some day the fashions will change and that kind of work will be it again.”

“Just remember,” said Yonatan, “I haven’t promised you anything.”

And so Yonatan began to put in six hours a day in the tractor shed. There wasn't much to do except take routine care of the tractors and make an occasional repair if it was simple enough. Most of the other farm machinery, still and frozen, slumbered away the winter beneath the tin roof that rattled in the wind. The engine oil grew black and viscous. The instrument panels were clouded by vapors. You had to be out of your mind to try to wake these monsters from their sullen hibernation and get them running again. Let them rest in peace. I'm here because of the cold and the rain, he told himself, and not for long either.

At ten o'clock every morning he would slosh his way from the tractor shed to the metal shop to drink a cup of coffee with the lame Bolognesi and have a look at that day's sports section.

Bolognesi was not really an Italian. He was a Tripolitanian hired hand with a dark, stubbly face, a mouth that smelled slightly of arak, and a torn ear that resembled a rotten-ripe pear. A lanky, stooped man in his middle fifties, he lived by himself in a shack, one half of which had once housed a shoemaker, while the other half still served on occasion as a barbershop. Although he had served fifteen years for chopping the head off his brother's fiancée with an ax, the precise details of the affair were not known. Naturally, different and occasionally gruesome versions of it circulated. He wore a permanently pinched look, as if he had just bitten into a piece of spoiled fish that he could neither swallow nor spit out. Whether it was because he had become a pious Jew while in jail, or for some other reason, President Ben-Tsvi had decided to pardon him. In a letter to the kibbutz, the Committee for Reformed Convicts had officially vouched for his character, and so he was taken on as a helper in the metal shop and given his tumbledown, tarpaper half of a shack to live in.

Since settling on the kibbutz, he had taken up in his free time the art of knitting he had learned in prison and made

marvelous sweaters for the kibbutz children, and sometimes, for the young ladies, stylish outfits copied from knitwear magazines bought with his own money and studied carefully. He spoke little in his feminine voice and always with extreme caution, as if whatever he said might implicate him or embarrass you. Once, during their coffee break, Yonatan, without looking up from his newspaper, asked, “Say, Bolognesi, why do you keep looking at me like that?”

“Look your shoe,” said the Italian with extraordinary delicacy, barely parting his lips. “Your shoe she’s open and the water she gets inside. I fix’a your shoe right away?”

“Don’t bother,” said Yonatan. “Thanks anyway.” He went right back to the debate between two sports columnists over the upset in yesterday’s League Cup semifinals. Then he turned the page and started to read about a Jewish orthopedist from South America, also a football star, who had come to live in Israel and signed up with a Jerusalem team.

“I no fix’a, you no thank’a,” insisted Bolognesi with melancholy logic. “Why you thank’a me like that? Wha’ for?”

“For the coffee,” said Yonatan.

“You want I should pour’a ’nother?”

“No thanks.”

“Look. ’Scuse’a me, what you call’a this? Again you thank’a me for nothing? Wha’ for? No fix’a, no thank’a. And no get’a mad neither.”

“All right,” said Yonatan. “No one’s getting mad. But why don’t you pipe down, Bolognesi, and let me read my paper in peace?”

And to himself he said: No giving in this time. Tonight. You’ll do it tonight. Or, at the very latest, tomorrow night.

That afternoon, when Yonatan returned home, he lit the kerosene heater, washed his hands and face, and sat down

to wait for Rimona in one of the twin armchairs, his legs wrapped in a brown woolen blanket against the cold. Spread before him was the morning paper, in which from time to time his eye would pick out some item that struck him with amazement. In one, the President of Syria, Dr. Nur-ad-Din el-Atassi, a former gynecologist, and the Foreign Minister, Dr. Yussuf Zu'ein, a former ophthalmologist, had both spoken before a large, frenzied rally in Palmyra to call for the extermination of the state of Israel, the ophthalmologist swearing in the name of all those gathered not to spare one drop of its blood, since blood alone could expunge its affront to the Arabs and rivers of blood had to be crossed if their own holy road were to lead to the sunrise of justice. In another, an Arab youth, on trial in Haifa for peeping through a window in a Jewish neighborhood at a woman getting undressed, defended himself in fluent Hebrew by citing the precedent of King David and Bathsheba. Judge Nakdimon Zlelichin, the newspaper related, was so tickled by this novel plea that he let the youngster off with a stern rebuke and a warning. In the corner of an inside page was an account of an experiment performed in the Zurich zoo, in the course of which unseasonable light and heat were admitted into the bears' house to test the depth of their hibernation: finally one bear awoke only to go mad.

Lulled by the steady, monotonous drip of the rain in the drainpipe, Yonatan soon dozed off and let the paper drop. It was a light, troubled sleep of groggy reveries that turned into nightmares. Dr. Schillinger from Haifa, the gynecologist with the stammer who had treated Rimona and advised her against trying again, became a cunning Syrian agent. On behalf of the secret service, Yolek urged Udi, Yonatan, and Etan R. to undertake a dangerous journey to some northern land and lay the serpent low in its lair with an ax stroke from behind. Unfortunately, since they were all made of wet absorbent cotton, none of the six

bullets in Yonatan's revolver was able to penetrate his target's skin. The man simply grinned with rotten teeth and hissed, *"Ty zboju!"* Yonatan opened his eyes and before him stood Rimona. "It's a quarter after four," she said, "and getting dark. Why don't you sleep a little more while I shower and make us coffee?"

"I wasn't sleeping," he replied, "I was just thinking. Did you know that the dictator of Syria is also a gynecologist?"

"You were sleeping when I came in," said Rimona. "And I woke you. But we'll have coffee soon."

She showered and changed clothes while the water boiled in the electric kettle. Slim, shapely, and clean in a red sweater and blue corduroy pants, she served the coffee and cake. She looked like a shy schoolgirl with her long, light, freshly washed hair, enveloped in a bitter scent of almond soap and shampoo. They sat in the twin armchairs, facing each other, letting the music from the radio fill the silence. After that came music from a record, the throbbing, sensual beat of the African bush.

Even at the best of times Rimona and Yonatan spoke sparingly to each other, and then only when they had to. Quarreling had long since become pointless. Rimona was gathered in her own thoughts, her feet tucked under her, her hands pulled back into the sleeves of her sweater. She looked like a lonely little girl freezing on a park bench in winter.

"When the rain stops, I'll go out for more kerosene. The tank's nearly empty," she offered, breaking the silence.

Yonatan stubbed out his cigarette on the side of a copper ashtray.

"Don't. I'll get it. I have to talk to Shimon anyway."

"Why don't you give me your jacket so I can tighten the buttons while you're out?"

"But you spent a whole evening tightening the buttons just a week ago."

“That was your new jacket. I want to fix the old one, your brown one.”

“Do me a favor, Rimona. Leave that old rag alone. It’s falling apart. Either throw the goddamn thing out or give it to the Italian. He makes coffee for me every morning and even thanks me for it.”

“Yoni, you’re not going to give that jacket to anybody. I can fix it, just take it out a bit in the shoulders, and you can still wear it to work to keep you warm.”

Yonatan said nothing. He emptied a matchbox onto the table, tried making a simple geometric pattern, swept it away, made another, more complicated pattern, and swept that one away too. He gathered up the matches and returned them neatly to their box. A cracked old, bone-dry, mocking voice rasped within him: That joker, he couldn’t even hit the side of a bull from three feet away. “But Their Hearts Were Not True.” Yonatan recalled the only possible answer.

“I’ll mend it,” Rimona persisted. “You can wear it to work.”

“Oh, great!” said Yonatan. “It’ll be a sensation. I’ll show up for work one morning in a sport jacket. Maybe I’ll wear a tie too, put a white handkerchief in my breast pocket like a secret agent, cut my hair short as my father has been nagging me to do. Can you hear, Rimona, how strong that wind is!”

“The wind may be strong, but the rain has stopped.”

“I’d better go out then. Talk to Shimon. Get the kerosene. And I really ought to sit down with Udi too, and go over the accounts. What’s that?”

“Nothing. I didn’t say anything, Yoni.”

“All right. See you.”

“Wait a minute. Don’t wear your new jacket. Wear the old one. I’ll mend it when you get back.”

“Oh, no, you won’t, because it’ll be soaking wet.”

“We said that the rain had stopped, Yoni.”

“We said! A lot of good that does. What if we did? By the time I get back, it will be raining again. In fact, there it goes. Just listen to it come down. It’s a flood!”

“Don’t go out, Yoni. Sit down a while. I’ll pour some more coffee. And if you’re looking for something to give your Italian, why don’t you give him that can of instant we never use? I like to brew us real coffee, good and strong.”

“Listen, Rimona. That Italian! You know how he says, I’ll pour you a cup? ‘I’ll pour’a you a cup.’ You know how he says, It’s raining cats and dogs? ‘It’s rain’m catch’m dog.’ But you’re not listening. Why is it that every time I say something to you, you never listen, you never answer, you’re never there. Why?”

“Don’t get mad, Yoni.”

“Now you too. What’s the matter with all of you today? Since I got up this morning everyone’s been telling me not to get mad when I haven’t been mad at all. Suppose I feel like getting mad, then what? I have no right to? Everyone wants to argue with me all day long. You, Udi, that Italian, my father, Etan R. Everyone! It could drive you mad. Every day that crazy Italian wants to fix my boot. Every evening it’s you with that rag of a jacket, and every night it’s my father with some new job he’s cooked up. Do me a favor, will you? Take a look at this newspaper, at those Syrians my father wants peace and brotherhood with, those Syrians he’d like to take to his bed, look how they talk about us. The only thing they want is to slaughter us all and drink our blood. Hey, you’re dreaming again. You’re not listening to one word I say.”

“I am, Yoni. What’s wrong with you? I’m not your father.”

“I don’t care who you are, I just want you to listen to the rain instead of telling me that it’s stopped and sending me out for your kerosene. Do me a favor. Go to the window, you’re not blind, are you, and have a good look at what’s happening out there.”

Rimona and Yonatan continued to sit opposite each other in silence, the darkness deepening all around them. Treetops stirred noisily as though raided by an ax. A frightened lowing of cows could be heard through the shriek of the wind. Yonatan suddenly thought of the abandoned Arab village of Sheikh Dahr. This very night, the downpour might be crumbling the last of its earthen hovels, dust to dust, the ruins of its low stone walls might be surrendering at last, a loose stone toppling down, earthward in the darkness, after twenty years of clinging to its mates. There couldn't be a soul on the hills of Sheikh Dahr on a night like this, not one stray dog, not a single bird. What a perfect hideout for a murderer like Bolognesi or Benyamin Trotsky. Or me. No one there. Only stillness and the dark and winter winds. Only the smashed minaret of the mosque, twisted like the trunk of a felled tree. A nest of killers, they told us in our childhood. A den of bloody bandits. And once it was leveled, they told us we could sleep in peace at night. The minaret from which they sniped right into the kibbutz had been sliced in two halfway up by a direct mortar hit, a hit, so they say, that was aimed by the commander-in-chief of the Jewish forces himself.

Once, when I was a boy, I went by myself to Sheikh Dahr to look for the buried treasure of gold coins that was supposed to be under the floor of the sheikh's house. I began to pull up the painted green tiles to look beneath them for the secret steps that led to the hiding place. Shaking with fear, because of the owls, the bats, the ghosts lurking there at night to choke you from behind with their thin fingers, I kept on digging but all I found was strange gray dust like the ashes of an ancient fire and a wide rotten board. I pulled it to one side, and beneath were old harnesses, a threshing sled, some bits of an old wooden plow, and still more dust. I dug on until evening came and some ghastly bird screeched. Then I took off. I ran down the hill but made a wrong turn at the fork in the wadi and