

Chapter 31 – The Scent of Orange Blossoms

Early spring in Israel is characterized by the fragrance of orange blossoms; that wonderful citrus aroma rising from thousands of flowering orchards on farms, kibbutzim and in private groves in every corner of the land. The fragrance of spring, of new beginnings, of a brightness, so that the entire country smells like it's been sprayed with a giant air freshener. Even in the very centre of Tel Aviv, right in the heart of this sprawling, vibrant, dynamic, dirty, Mediterranean city, the scent mingles with diesel and petrol fumes to produce a unique, intoxicating tang, blended with enticing smells from restaurants, bakeries and coffee shops. The farm-yard odour of horse manure from the “*alte zakhen*”, the “rag and bone” men who still plied their trade in their horse-drawn carts through the city streets, adds a pungent incongruity which is so typically Israeli, a throwback to the pioneering days of this “First Hebrew City”, founded on sand dunes north of the ancient port of Jaffa less than a century earlier.

On just such a day, slightly chilly, when the winter has passed and summer beckons from the near future, Tel Aviv was preparing to celebrate the Festival of Purim. Despite a wave of terrorist suicide bombing attacks in the past few days and weeks, this brash new metropolis was full of life. The streets were crowded, gearing up for the festival which commemorated the deliverance of the Jews of Shushan in Persia from the evil Haman, the wicked Grand Vizier of King Ahashverus (or Xerxes, as he is known in the history books), who had vowed to eradicate them.

It's a fascinating story, worthy of the land from which it originates. A story of intrigue and beautiful women, of lavish masque balls, of secret schemes and trickery, of heroism and the ultimate triumph of good over evil. The story recorded in the Book of Esther, is read in special services on the eve of the festival in synagogues throughout the world. Whenever Haman's name is mentioned, normal decorum is abandoned and there are shouts of derision and the rattle and rasp of noise makers, and squeals from horns and whistles to symbolize obliterating the tyrant's name.

Purim is Carnival Time; the country's own version of Rio, of the Mardi Gras. The streets are crowded with children, adorned in fancy dress. Every city has its Purim parade, known in Hebrew as the “*ad lo 'yadah...*” literally “until you don't know anymore...” an injunction to enjoy yourselves to the full, to really let go, to truly celebrate your freedom in your own country. It is the one and only holiday on which the Jews are encouraged to get mindlessly intoxicated...oblivious in celebration of their deliverance.

There are normally parades in every city with motorized floats festooned in various themes. Groups of children dance and sing along the routes, marching bands and trick cyclists, jugglers and clowns, music and noise. It's a wonderful holiday for Israel. Plates of tasty treats are exchanged as gifts and given to the needy. Each plate packed with sweets and chocolates, fruits, pastries and of course, the ubiquitous “*Hamantaschen*”. This sweet three-cornered pastry, filled with poppy seeds or minced fruit – or these days, even gooey chocolate – is made in the shape of Haman's hat, his pocket or his ears, as the Hebrew word for them is “*Oznei Haman* - Haman's Ears”.

Although there were to be no parades clogging the city streets this year, in deference to those who had been killed in the recent wave of attacks, the entire city was turned out in fancy dress costumes: pirates, soldiers, wizards, fairies, astronauts, and of course, replica Esthers,

Vashtis and Mordecais, the heroes of the Purim story. Bright colours, bright costumes, bright faces of young and old.

Just a few years earlier, Purim had been the milestone marking the end of the first Gulf War, when Saddam Hussein – who, in taking on the mantle of a latter day Haman had sworn to destroy Israel and all of its Jews – had been roundly defeated, if not entirely eliminated.

Two women who came to Israel to build new lives for themselves, away from the rapidly degenerating, crime-ridden society into which the new South Africa seemed to be rapidly descending, were among the holiday crowds.

Françoise's elder sister, Janice and her mother, Sonya, had both arrived in Israel during the past year, both anxious to get away from South Africa and the high probability of being mugged, robbed, or even murdered in their own homes for the contents of a handbag, a few otherwise meaningless possessions, or a hijacked motor car.

Janice had been divorced for a number of years, but shortly after arriving in Israel she had met the man of her dreams, Michael Kagan. He was an American-born archaeologist, who took her to digs, regaled her with tales of ancient Hebrews, Canaanites, Nabataeans and Assyrians, and gave her exclusive first views of newly unearthed and restored, remarkably beautiful, Roman mosaic floors, unseen for 2,000 years.

The names of archaeological sites: Bet Shean, Avdat, Tel Dan, Tzipori, became part of vocabulary and under her new loves guidance, she often spent blissful hours on a dig, unearthing the foundations of a Biblical-era house, or carefully brushing the sands of ages off pottery shards, urns and stones inscribed with proto-Hebrew, Greek or even Egyptian hieroglyphics.

She was just 47, in the full bloom of her life; slim and stylish, attractive, funny, popular, self-confident...sometimes even a little brash. She and Michael had recently flown to Cyprus to be married in a quick and quiet civil ceremony, without the interference of rabbis and family. Now she felt fulfilled, excited, and radiantly in love with her archaeologist; finally content after years of a frequently tumultuous marriage.

On this early spring day, she and her mother, a widow for more than 25 years, were in Tel Aviv for a final fitting of a wedding dress for Janice's elder daughter, Yael, who was due to be married in two weeks' time. Yael had come to Israel a few years earlier and had met her Israeli, soon-to-be-husband at a wild all-night party. The decision to get married was made once her mother and grandmother had finalized their move.

Sonya at 73, but looking 10 years younger, was always immaculately groomed. Flawless make-up, her hair neatly coiffured, nail polish just the right tone, wearing the bright primary colours that she loved; reds, blues, yellows; her scarves, blouses, skirts, belts – everything matching perfectly. She was a vibrant, charming, charismatic women who could look back in pride and with some nostalgia, on a life of love, tinged with her own measure of tragedy and grief, and her many achievements in her profession as a marriage guidance counsellor.

She loved living in Israel. Despite not being able to speak Hebrew, she was fluent in Yiddish, actually her mother-tongue, having been born in Lithuania. She had no hesitation about striking up a conversation with almost anybody of her age group – provided they were Ashkenazi Jews and more often than not recent Russian immigrants – in the street, on the bus, sitting on a park bench, in line at the supermarket; it was a *sheer* joy for her. She felt thoroughly at home.

Although Sonya and Janice did not arrive in their “*Goldene Medina*,” their “Promised Land” on board an immigrant ship direct from the horrors of Nazi Europe, or on an overcrowded

cargo plane ferrying refugees from Yemen or Ethiopia, they, in their own way, had come to find a better life. And they did.

How insanely ironic then, that in this country, Israel, where in stark contrast to the new South Africa, it is safe to walk through even the darkest streets alone in the dead of night, it was not safe that bright early spring afternoon to cross crowded, traffic-jammed, Dizengoff Street.

Dizengoff Centre is literally the heart of Tel Aviv. It is a massive shopping mall, one of the largest in the Middle East, containing shops, restaurants, entertainment centres, movie houses. A natural meeting place for the young. Thousands of teenagers, most in Purim costumes, were there on this particular day. It was a holiday, no school, no studies. Just the prospect of fun; of meeting friends, of hanging out, going to a movie, shopping for clothes, having coffee, or a pizza or hamburger, ice cream or milk shake in one of the scores of restaurants and fast food outlets which epitomize Tel Aviv street life.

The mall stands at the southern end of Dizengoff Street. Named for the first mayor of this brassy new city, it is Israel's answer to Oxford Street, Ave. George Cinq or Fifth Avenue. Not quite as classy as some of those perhaps, but just as much a magnet for fun and entertainment. Pavement cafes and restaurants, trendy shops, book stores, conдитoria...noise and movement and full of Mediterranean brio and atmosphere. Tel Aviv's motto is "The City that Never Stops" and it is evident here on the corner of Dizengoff and King George Street. The cross-roads used by thousands of people every hour of every day. On that particular day, that Purim Eve, thousands of children were thronging the street. In their fancy dress, with or without their parents. In Israel, children roam the streets freely. They learn their independence early. There is generally little crime to worry and they move about the cities with little fear.

Except on this day, there was much to fear. On this day, which celebrated the downfall of Haman, an even more murderous entity, bearing almost the same name, Hamas, was about to strike.

No of pages: 1 – Words 1,573