

*The*  
**Blue Mountain**

A NOVEL



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# THE BLUE MOUNTAIN

MEIR SHALEV

Translated from the Hebrew by

HILLEL HALKIN



CANONGATE

*Edinburgh · London · New York · Melbourne*

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*To Batya, my mother*

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One summer night the old schoolteacher Ya'akov Pinness awoke from his sleep with a great start. 'I'm screwing Liberson's granddaughter!' someone had shouted outside.

High, brazen, and clear, the shout winged past the Canary Isle pine trees near the water tower. For a moment it hovered like a bird of prey before swooping earthwards to the village. The old teacher felt a familiar twinge of pain. Once more he alone had heard the obscene words.

For years he had chinked every crack, repaired every rent, stood in the breach every time. 'Like the Dutch boy plugging the dyke,' he would say as he beat back yet another threat. Fruit aphids, starling lotteries, cattle ticks, anopheles mosquitoes, bands of locusts and jazz musicians swirled around him like dark waves before breaking in a slimy froth against the breastwork of his heart.

Pinness sat up in bed and wiped his fingers on the hair on his chest, perplexed and enraged that life in the village could go on as usual when such debauchery publicly thumbed a nose at it.

The little co-operative settlement in the Valley of Jezreel was sound asleep. The mules and cows in their sheds, the hens in their coops, the visionary men of toil in their humble beds. Like an old machine whose parts were used to each other, the village purred routinely in the night. Udders filled with milk, clusters of grapes swelled with juice, prime beef waxed fat on the joints of calves soon to be sent to the slaughterhouse. Tireless bacteria, 'our one-celled friends', as Pinness appreciatively called them in the classroom, laboured to fix fresh nitrogen at the roots of plants. But notorious and impatient and even-tempered though he was, the old educator was determined to let no one, least of all himself, rest on the laurels of productivity and past achievement. 'I'll catch you yet, you degenerate!' he mumbled irately, jumping heavily from his iron bed. His hands trembled as he buttoned his olive khaki pants and pulled on his confidence-inspiring black work boots in preparation for the fray. He was too upset to find his glasses in the dark, but the moonlight shining through the cracks in the door showed him the way.

Outside he tripped over a molehill subversively dug in the garden. He picked himself up, brushed himself off, called out, 'Who's there?' and waited intently for an answer, his myopic eyes boring into the night while his large hoary head swivelled back and forth like an owl's.

The lecherous shout was not repeated. It never was. Each time it was sounded but once.

The coarse words, Pinness brooded, were a battle cry of decadence, of mean hedonism, of individualism run wild – in short, of gross breach of conduct. Reluctantly the old teacher, 'under whose tutelage our children were reared to a life of high ideals and hard work', recalled the great chocolate robbery, in which several of his eldest pupils had raided the village co-op; the steamer trunk of Riva Margulis, which had arrived from Russia bursting with seductive luxuries and outrageous frills; and the devilish laughter of the hyena haunting the fields outside the village, 'smirking and unrepentant to no good'.

The thought of the hyena when he was without his spectacles and unable to see a thing plunged the alarmed Pinness into an all but paralysing anxiety.

The hyena was a sometime visitor to the area, a messenger unleashed from the worlds that lay beyond the wheat fields and the blue mountain. Several times in the years since the founding of the village the old teacher had heard its clear, mocking bark ring out from the nearby wadi, and a shiver had run down his spine.

The hyena's bite was highly dangerous. Some of its victims were so badly infected that they sowed penicillaria in autumn and pruned their vineyards in summer. Others took leave of their senses and became doubters, cynics, even turncoats, forsaking the land and drifting off to the city, or else dying or even leaving the country.

Pinness was beside himself with worry. He had lived long enough to see the many fallers by the wayside, the slinking deserters re-embarking in the ports, the haggard suicides at rest in their graves. He saw renegades and deviants everywhere – 'The parasitic Talmudists of Jerusalem, the messianic millenarians of Safed, the credulous Communists, disciples of Lenin and Michurin, who were the ruin of the Workers' Brigade'. Long years of observation and reflection had taught him how easily a man was struck down once his immune system failed him.

'It especially attacks children, because their young minds are still vulnerable,' he warned, demanding that the schoolhouse be guarded around the clock when the scurrilous creature's tracks were discovered near the farmers' houses. At night he joined the posse of young men, his former pupils, who sought to track the fiend down. But the hyena was wily and elusive.

'Like other traitors we've known,' said Pinness at one of the village's general meetings.

One night when he was out hunting shrews and tree toads for the school nature corner, he saw the hyena cross the planted fields on the other side of the wadi and come toward him with the steady distance-devouring lope of a wild beast. Pinness stopped in his tracks while the creature fixed its bright orange eyes on him and purred seductively. He could clearly make out the large, sloping shoulders, the bulging jaws, and the striped coat that swelled and bristled along the ridged backbone.

The hyena quickened its pace, trampling the tender vetch sprouts, and threw the old pedagogue its last mocking smile, baring its purulent fangs as it vanished into a wall of sorghum. Only when Pinness realised that he had forgotten to take his gun along did Pinness understand the reason for 'that sly grin'.

'Pinness always forgets his gun,' said the farmers upon hearing of the nocturnal encounter. The old man still recalled how, long ago, when the village was newly founded and Pinness's wife Leah died of malaria while pregnant with twin daughters, he had risen from the deathbed of his beloved, whose body continued to exude green sweat even after it was cold and still, and taken off on the run for the copse of acacia trees in the wadi that was a popular spot for suicides. Several friends who rushed to the rescue found him lying among the golden thistles, sobbing bitterly. 'He forgot his gun then too.'

Now, thinking agitatedly of the abominable beast, of his dead wife, and of her two blue, sinless foetuses, Pinness stopped shouting, 'Who's there?', returned to his room, found his glasses, and hurried off to my grandfather.

Pinness knew that Grandfather rarely slept. He knocked and entered without waiting, the slam of the screen door waking me up. I glanced at Grandfather's bed. As usual it was empty. The smell of his cigarette drifted in from the kitchen.

I was fifteen years old. Most of those years had been passed in Grandfather's cabin. He had raised me with his own hands, the hands of a planter. Under his watchful eyes I had grown, bound tightly by the heavy raffia of his yarns. In the village I was known as 'Mirkin's orphan', but Grandfather, a man so merciful, zealous, and vengeful, never called me anything but 'my child'.

He was as old and pale as though he had dipped himself in the white unguent he painted the trunk of his fruit trees with each spring. He was also short, sinewy, moustached, and mostly bald, with eyes that had slowly receded into their sockets and lost their lustre until they had come to resemble green, nebulous rock pools.

On summer nights Grandfather liked to sit at the kitchen table in his faded undershirt and blue shorts, filling the room with smoke and good, woody, milky smells while swinging viney legs that

were gnarled from work, and reliving old memories and iniquities. He had a habit of jotting down his thoughts on scraps of paper, which later flew about the room like swarms of migrating butterflies. I kept awaiting the return of whomever he had lost. ‘To see them again become flesh before my eyes,’ once found written on a note that fluttered into my hand.

Many times, from the day I was old enough to wonder about it until the day he died, I asked him ‘What are you thinking about, Grandfather?’ His answer was always the same. ‘About you and me, my child.’

We lived in the old cabin. Casuarinas showered their needles on its roof, and I climbed up there twice a year on Grandfather’s orders to brush layers of them off. The cabin floor was raised above the ground to keep the wooden walls free of insects and dampness, and the dark, narrow hollow beneath resounded with the wars of hedgehogs and snakes and the soft scratching of skink scales. Once, after a huge, poisonous centipede crawled into the room, Grandfather bricked off this space. But the deaf groans and grunts for mercy coming from below persuaded him to dismantle his enclosure, and he never repeated the experiment.

Our cabin was one of the last in the village. The founding fathers had spent their first funds on concrete sheds for the cows, made vulnerable to the vagaries of the weather by long centuries of domestication that had rendered them deaf to the call of the wild. The pioneers themselves lived in tents and later in wooden cabins. Years went by before a brick house stood in every farmyard. Our cabin was inhabited by my uncle Avraham, his wife Rivka, and my twin cousins Yosi and Uri.

Grandfather hadn’t wanted to leave the cabin. A planter of trees, he was a lover of wood.

‘A wooden house breathes, sweats, and moves,’ he told me. ‘No two people make the same sound when they walk in it.’ Proudly he pointed at the thick beam over his bed that put out a green sprout every spring.

The cabin had two rooms and a kitchen. In one room Grandfather and I slept on our iron beds whose prickly mattresses were stuffed with seaweed. There was a large, simple clothes closet, and next to it, the ‘commode’, and a chest of drawers with a cracked marble top; in its uppermost drawer Grandfather kept his raffia twine and rolls of Graftex. In the pouches of a leather belt hanging from a nail on the wall were his red-handled shears, his grafting knives, and a tube of homemade black tar for pruning cuts. His other things – his pruning saw, his alembics of salves and poisons, his pots for mixing his ‘Bordeaux Soup’, his solutions of arsenic, nicotine, and pyrethrum – were kept in the locked storeroom by the cowshed where my uncle Efrayim had shut himself up prior to his final disappearance.

In the second room were the kind of books that could be found in every house in the village: Bodenheimer and Klein’s *The Farmer’s Insect Book*, blue-bound issues of *Field* and *The Planter*, a copy of *Yevgeni Onegin* in a light cloth binding, a black Bible, the Mitzpeh and Stiebel series of Hebrew literature, and the books that Grandfather loved most of all, the two greenish volumes of Luther Burbank’s *Harvest of the Years*. “‘Small, lithe, slightly stooped,” he had “knees and elbows bent a little from long years of the hardest physical labour,”” Grandfather read to me from the introduction to the American plant wizard’s autobiography. Burbank, though, had eyes of ‘a deep and placid blue’, while Grandfather’s had turned grey.

Next to the Burbank was a row of memoirs written by people who were Grandfather’s friends. I still remember the titles of some of them: *Native Paths*, *From the Don to the Jordan*, *My Earth*, *The Road Home*. These friends were the heroes of my childhood stories. All of them, Grandfather told me in his Russian accent, had been born in a faraway land that they left ‘clandestinely’ long ago, some in railroad cars full of *muzhiks* – poor Russian farmers – on trains that ‘travelled slowly amid snow and wild apple trees’ via rocky coasts, great salt lakes, bald hills, and sandstorms. Others, mounted on wild geese whose wings stretched as far as ‘from the hayloft to the brooding house’, soared with



joyous quacks over vast fields and high above the Black Sea. Still others knew secret passwords that 'carried them off in a gale' to the Land of Israel, where they landed all in a sweat, afraid to open their eyes. And then there was Shifris.

'When we were already at the railway station at Makarov and the conductor blew the all-aboard, Shifris suddenly announced that he wasn't coming with us. Finish your tomato, Baruch.'

I opened my mouth, and Grandfather slipped a slice of tomato sprinkled with rock salt into it.

'Shifris said to us, "Comrades! To the Land of Israel we should go on foot, like pilgrims." And with that he parted from us, shouldered his pack, waved, and disappeared in a puff of steam. He's still trudging along on his way, the last pioneer to arrive.'

Grandfather told me about Shifris so that someone would know who he was when he came. Long after all the others had given up or died without waiting, I went on expecting him. I would be the boy who ran to greet him when he neared the village. Each dot on the distant flank of the mountain was his approaching form. A circle of ashes by the side of a field was the campfire he had made to boil tea. Tufts of wool in a hawthorn tree were the remains of his torn puttees. Every unfamiliar footprint in the dirt was a sign he had left as he passed by.

I asked Grandfather to show me Shifris's route on the map, the borders he had crossed clandestinely, the rivers he had forded. I was fourteen years old when Grandfather said to me, 'That's enough of Shifris.'

'He really did say he would walk,' he told me. 'But after a few days he must have run out of steam. Or else something happened to him on the way – maybe he got sick or hurt himself or joined the Party or fell in love ... who knows, my child? There's more than one thing can nail a man down to a place.'

On one of his slips of paper, in tiny letters, I found this note: 'The flowering, not the fruit. The way, not the distance covered.'

The books were propped against a large Philco radio that subscribers to *Field* could buy in easy instalments. Facing them were a couch and two armchairs that my uncle Avraham and his wife Rivka had moved to Grandfather's cabin after refurnishing their house. Grandfather called this room the living room, although his guests always sat at the large table in the kitchen.

Pinness stepped inside. I recognised at once the loud voice that had taught me Bible and nature.

'Mirkin,' he said, 'he's been shouting again.'

'Who was it this time?' asked Grandfather.

'I'm screwing Liberson's granddaughter,' said Pinness loudly and emphatically. Shutting the window apprehensively, he added, 'Not me, whoever shouted.'

'That's wonderful,' said Grandfather. 'A most accomplished fellow. Would you care for some tea?'

I strained to hear their conversation. More than once I had been caught eavesdropping behind open windows, a secret listener among fruit trees and bales of hay. With a practised movement I would wrest myself free of the hands gripping me and walk away with head high and shoulders square, silent and untouchable. Later, when the injured party came to complain, Grandfather wouldn't believe a word of it.

I heard his old feet scrape across the wooden floor, followed by the pouring of water, the tinkle of teaspoons against thin glass, and loud slurps. I had stopped being surprised long ago by the way the old people of the village could hold burning glasses in their hands and calmly swallow boiling water.

'The nerve of him!' said Pinness. 'How could he shout like that? Shooting his foul mouth off in the trees!'

'It's just someone's idea of a joke,' said Grandfather.

'But what should I do?' groaned the old schoolteacher, who took it as his personal failure. 'How

can I show my face to the village?’

~~He rose and began pacing relentlessly. I could hear him cracking his knuckles in chagrin.~~

‘Boys will be boys,’ said Grandfather. ‘Why get so worked up about it?’

The chuckle creeping into his voice enraged Pinness even more. ‘Screaming at the top of his lungs so that the whole world can hear him!’

‘Look, Ya’akov,’ said Grandfather soothingly, ‘we live in a small place. If someone goes too far he’ll be caught by the night watchmen and the Committee will take it up at a meeting. Why get so worked up?’

‘But I’m the teacher,’ stormed Pinness. ‘The teacher, Mirkin, the educator! It’s me they’ll blame.’

Filed away in Meshulam Tsirkin’s documentary archives was Pinness’s famous declaration at the 1923 Conference of the Movement: ‘The biological ability to bear children is no guarantee of the ability to educate them.’

‘No one’s going to blame you for some horny young ass,’ said Grandfather sharply. ‘You’ve given the village and the Movement a splendid generation of youngsters.’

‘I can picture every one of them,’ said Pinness softly. ‘They come to the first form as tender as a baby rushes, like flowers that I weave into the brocade of our life.’

Pinness never spoke of ‘years’, only of ‘forms’. I smiled to myself in the darkness, knowing what would come next. Pinness liked to compare education to agriculture. When talking about his work, he was prone to expressions like ‘virgin earth’, ‘an unpruned vine’, ‘irrigation holes’. His pupils were saplings. Each form was a furrow.

‘Mirkin,’ he continued emotionally, ‘I may not be a farmer like the rest of you, but I too sow and reap. They’re my vineyard, my orchard. It only takes one rotten apple ...’ He almost choked on his own despair. ‘Yea, and it brought forth wild grapes.... Screwing! The issue of horses and the flesh of asses!’

Like all his pupils, I was used to his quoting from the Bible, but I had never heard verses like these from him before. Unwittingly I moved in my bed and froze at once. The floorboards creaked beneath the weight of my body, and the two of them fell silent for a minute. At the age of fifteen I weighed close to sixteen and a half stone and could grab a large calf by the horns and wrestle it to the ground. My size and strength were marvelled at in the village, the farmers joking that Grandfather must be feeding me colostrum, the vim-giving first milk of nursing cows.

‘Not so loud,’ said Grandfather. ‘You’ll wake the child.’

The child; that’s what he called me until the day he died. ‘My child.’ Even when dark hair had sprouted all over my body. Even when my voice had changed and my shoulders had grown broad and beefy. My cousin Uri couldn’t stop laughing when our voices began to crack. I was the only boy in the village, he said, whose voice went from baritone to bass.

Pinness uttered a few sentences in Russian, the language the founding fathers switched to for angry whispers, after which I heard a metallic pop that was the sound of Grandfather opening a can of homemade olives with a screwdriver. Now he would place a full saucer of them on the table. As soon as Pinness, who had a great liking for anything hot, sour, or salty, began to devour them, his mood would lighten at once.

‘Do you remember, Mirkin, how we stepped off the boat, a bunch of yokels from Makarov, and ate black olives in that restaurant in Jaffa? And that pretty blonde girl with the blue kerchief who waved to us in the street?’

Grandfather didn’t answer. Words like ‘Do you remember ...’ left him cold. Besides, I knew he couldn’t talk because he had an olive in his mouth and was sucking on it slowly as he sipped his tea. ‘Either you eat or you remember,’ he once said to me. ‘There’s only so much you can chew on at once.’

It was a habit of his to keep a cracked olive in his mouth while he drank his tea and nibbled gingerly at the sugar cube hidden in his palm, enjoying the soft, bittersweet combination. ‘Tea and olives. Russia and the Land of Israel.’

‘These olives are good,’ said Pinness, growing affable. ‘Wonderful. How few are the pleasures left us, Mirkin, how very few indeed, and how few are the things that still excite us! Can thy servant taste what I eat or what I drink? Can I hear any more the voice of singing men and singing women?’

‘You seemed excited enough when you walked in,’ Grandfather remarked.

‘What gall!’ spat Pinness. I could hear the olive stone shoot from his mouth, bounce off the table and fly into the sink. Then there was silence, in which I knew that a new olive was slowly being crushed between Grandfather’s false teeth, releasing its subtly bitter juice.

‘And Efrayim?’ asked Pinness suddenly. ‘Have you heard anything of Efrayim?’

‘Not a word,’ replied Grandfather with predictable aloofness. ‘Nothing.’

‘It’s just you and Baruch, eh?’

‘Just me and the child.’

Just Grandfather and me.

The two of us. From the day he carried me in his arms from my parents’ house to the day I carried him in my arms to his grave in the orchard.

Just him and me.

My eyes clouded over with longing for Grandfather. I rose from the big leather armchair and wandered through the rooms of my home, the big house I bought after growing up, burying him and his friends in the orchard, becoming rich, and leaving the village. ‘Just me and the child’ – I could not get these words to disappear back into their drawer. I went out to the mowed lawn and lay down facing the shore and the booming surf.

I had bought the house and everything in it from a banker who had to leave the country in a hurry. I never knew why, just as I never knew anyone of his ilk and was never inside a bank in my life. The money I received from the families of the deceased had been stashed away in some fertiliser sacks in the cowshed, next to the bedding of old Zeitser, who slept with the cows on principle.

‘In the old days in Sejera I slept with the livestock too,’ he declared.

Zeitser’s large ears stuck out on either side of his old Russian worker’s cap. He was able to wiggle them, and sometimes, when in a good mood, he gave in to the pleas of us children and showed us how he did it. Zeitser had unshakeable principles and a platform that bent reality like a clover stem. ‘Zeitser,’ Grandfather once wrote, ‘is the only workers’ party that never split into factions, because it never had more than one member.’

Busquilla, the manager of my cemetery, Pioneer Home, brought me to my new house in the same van we used for transporting coffins from the airport and old folk’s homes, and headstones from old stone carvers in the Galilee.

It was a spacious white residence surrounded by a fragrant hedge of pittosporum. Busquilla surveyed it with a satisfied look before ringing the buzzer on the electronic gate. As soon as I told him that the last of the pioneers was dead, that there was no room for even one more grave, and that I wanted to shut down the business and leave the village, he went and found me a new place to live. He bought it on his own, haggling with the agents and wearing down the lawyers with his poisonous good nature.

Standing there with him in front of the big gate, I realised that I had never lived in a real house in my life. My only home had been Grandfather’s wooden cabin, the likes of which the other farmers in the village had long ago turned into sheds or chopped into firewood.

I was wearing my blue work clothes. Busquilla, in a light linen suit, was carrying a sack in one hand. The banker hurried out to us, a plump, agile man propelled by flabby muscles along the polished floor tiles.

‘Ah,’ he called out. ‘It’s the undertakers.’

Busquilla said nothing. Years of ideological warfare with our village and the Movement had taught him that our cemetery was resented by whomever was not buried in it. He untied the sack and dumped the dusty banknotes on the rug, sending up a noxious cloud of ammonium sulphate. Then, stepping up to the gasping banker, he slapped him hard on the back with one hand while shaking his hand with the other.

‘Busquilla, Mordecai, director,’ he announced. ‘It’s all in cash, as agreed. Please be so kind as to count it.’

Busquilla is my right-hand man. He’s a good friend too, though he’s a generation older than me. A short, sharp, thin-haired, thin-bodied man who always gives off an agreeable smell of green soap.

While the banker gathered up the notes, Busquilla showed me around the large house, leading me over entrapping rugs, past fancy crystal and a collection of silver goblets. Sketches and portraits peered down at me in anger and astonishment from every wall. Busquilla stuck his head into a walk-in cupboard where dozens of suits were hanging, and fingered the fabrics with an appraiser's expertise.

'What will you do with all this?' he asked. 'His clothes will be small on you.'

I told him to take whatever he liked. He put on a record, flooding the white interior with the soprano screech of an opera singer. The banker rushed furiously over.

'Can't you wait to have your party until I leave?' he snapped.

'The faster you count, the faster that will be,' smiled Busquilla. 'It's for your own good.' He put an arm around the banker's portly waist, spun him around in a dance step, and steered him gently back toward the pile of money.

Soon the lawyers arrived with the papers to sign. The banker took his luggage and made a quick getaway, and Busquilla, a drink already in his hand, went to wish him bon voyage from the terrace. Returning, he saw I looked depressed.

'Maybe I should leave?'

'Stay,' I said. 'You may as well sleep here. We'll have breakfast together, and then you can go.'

The banker's large bed was the first in my life that my legs did not stick out of. My body was not used to the submissive mattress, the black feel of silk perfumed with degeneracy, the redolence of fancy women who had left their prurient crinkles in the sheets. And yet the walls built in me by Pinness and Grandfather were impregnable. The calloused soles of my feet shredded the soft fabric, and the scuff of leather and wood panelling left no more trace on my skin than the glitter of chrome and crystal.

It was a quarter of an hour before dawn when I fell asleep, and then only for a few minutes. Grandfather's schedule was branded in my flesh like a tattooed clock. He always woke before me, put my breakfast on the table, gave me a quick, rough shake, and went out to work in the orchard. 'It's best to catch the pears before they're wide awake,' he explained to me.

Busquilla was still sleeping. I opened the large glass door and stepped outside. The banker's garden was too sweet-smelling, full of pompous flowers I had never seen before. Pinness had taught us to be experts in wildflowers and field crops exclusively.

'Dahlias and freesias are bourgeois plants,' he told us. 'Our ornamentals are the jonquil and the burnet, our gardens the vineyard and the clover patch.'

'That Burbank of yours,' he jeered at Grandfather, 'wasted good time growing chrysanthemums.'

Looking about me, I saw the sea for the first time in my life. It had always been hidden behind the mountain, though I knew of it from Grandfather's stories, because its waves had borne him and my father to this country and sprayed the handsome face of my lost uncle Efrayim as they carried him off to war. Half an hour later I was joined on the lawn by Busquilla, wearing a dressing gown and carrying a tray full of toast and tall glasses of juice.

We sat at one end of the garden, where my eyes, peering into the bushes, immediately picked out a balloon spider's web still shiny with dew. Busquilla guffawed while I crawled over on all fours in search for the spider itself. It was hiding in a little tent of dry leaves stitched together with filaments, lying in wait for its prey. It was Pinness who first showed me a balloon spider, in Grandfather's orchard. Early that summer he had taken me often to 'the School of Nature' to look for insects and spiders. With astounding agility, his old hand trapped a fly on a leaf and cast it onto a web.

'Watch closely, Baruch,' he said.

The spider came running down a radial strand, wrapped the fly in white shrouds, flipped the tiny mummy this way and that between its hairy legs, gave it a little poison kiss, and carried it off deftly to its hideaway. I stood up and walked back to Busquilla.

‘Well, do you feel better now?’ he asked, amused. ‘You’ll be all right here? I had the insect especially ordered for your new garden.’

When I was five, Grandfather and Pinness took me to Eliezer Liberson’s almond grove. Grandfather strode over to a tree, dug a little by its roots, and showed me signs of chewing and tunnelling beneath its bark. He ran his fingers over the trunk, pressing gently until he found what I was looking for, and then took out his grafting knife and cut an exact square in the bark. The large grub that appeared was a good four inches long, pale yellow in colour, with a broad, hard head that was much darker. Struck by the sunshine, it began to wriggle and curse.

‘Capnodis,’ said Grandfather. ‘The foe of the almond, the apricot, the plum, and every stone fruit.’

‘Whose work is done in darkness,’ quoted Pinness.

Grandfather pried the grub loose from its burrow with his knife tip and flung it to the ground. I felt a wave of anger and disgust.

‘We brought you here,’ Pinness said, ‘because your grandfather’s trees don’t have pests like this. Mother Capnodis stays away from trees that are healthy and well kept. She looks for the sickliest sheep in the flock and deposits her eggs there. Let her but see a robust tree bubbling with juices and she will straightaway seek another victim that is bitter, dry, and despondent. There she lays her eggs of doubt, which soon ravage the tormented soul from within.’

Grandfather turned away to hide his smile while Pinness kept me from crushing the grub with my foot.

‘Let it be,’ he said. ‘The jays will put it out of its misery. If the thief be found breaking in and be smitten so that he die, there shall be no bloodguilt for him.’

We went home, Grandfather holding me by one hand and Pinness by the other. Both were named Ya’akov. Ya’akov Mirkin and Ya’akov Pinness.

On another such outing Pinness showed me a capnodis beetle strolling on the branch of a tree.

‘She disguises herself as a black, rotten almond,’ he whispered.

When I reached for it, it tucked in its legs and fell like a pebble to the ground. The old teacher bent to pick it up and dropped it in a jar of chloroform.

‘She’s so tough,’ he told me, ‘that it takes a little hammer to drive the pin into her.’

The two old men drank a dozen glasses of tea, ate a pound of olives, and at 3 a.m. Pinness announced that he was going home and that if he ever found the Casanova, ‘he’ll rue the day he was born’.

He opened the door and stood facing the darkness for a moment. Then he turned around and said to Grandfather that he felt heavy at heart because he had just thought of the hyena.

‘The hyena is dead, Ya’akov,’ said Grandfather. ‘No one knows that better than you do. Relax.’

‘Every generation has its enemies,’ said Pinness darkly as he left.

He made his way home through the warm thicket of the night, treading upon ‘the thin crust of which our life has been established’, and thinking, I knew, of the menacing creatures of havoc that hatched and swarmed ceaselessly around him, bursting in his sombre nightmares like the bubbles of a foul, unruly past. He could sense the silent squat of the mongoose and see the blood-spotted face of the wildcat padding on its silken-pawed rampage of murder and plunder. Mice gnawed at the farmer’s labours in the fields of grain, and beneath the chequered carpet of ploughed field, stubble, and orchard waiting for the first signs of Doubt, growled the most legendary beast of all, the great swan imprisoned by the founders. Far in the west he saw the orange-glowing lights of the big city beyond the mountain, with their seductive glitter of exploitation and corruption, of easy money, carnal baubles, and lewd winks.

It took Grandfather a few minutes to clean up in the kitchen. Then he turned out the light and came

into the bedroom. He leaned over me for a moment, and I shut my eyes to make believe I was asleep.

~~'My little child,' he whispered, his moustache tickling my cheeks and mouth.~~

I was fifteen years old, over sixteen stone of raw muscle and bristly black hair, but Grandfather still made sure to cover me every night. He had done so on the first night he brought me home, and he did so now. Only then did he take his pyjamas from the linen chest under the bed. I watched him undress, undiminished and untarnished by the years. Even when I buried him in our orchard in the middle of the night, taking off the new pyjamas he had requested before dying, his body still gleamed with the same mysterious whiteness that had enveloped it all his life. All his friends were deep bronzed, their skin cracked and crisped by molten years of light and labour. But Grandfather had never gone out to his trees without a wide-brimmed straw hat and long sleeves, and his face was still pale as a sheet, unmarked by the whip lines of the sun.

He opened the window and got into bed with a sigh.

Meshulam Tsirkin shook his head at the end of each sentence, sending a handsome ripple through his mane of grey hair and splaying the bitter lines in his cheeks. Even as a child I had never liked the master-of-no-trades who lived at the other end of the village. ‘Who gave you such a big body and such a small brain?’ he used to ask me with a slap on my back, breaking into his cackling laugh.

Meshulam was the son of Mandolin Tsirkin, who, together with Grandfather, Grandmother Feyge and Eliezer Liberson, organised the Feyge Levin Workingman’s Circle. Mandolin was a good farmer and a wonderful musician, and today he is buried in my cemetery.

Pesya Tsirkin, Meshulam’s mother, was a functionary in the Movement and spent little time at home. Though Meshulam was fed by charitable neighbours and had to do his own and his father’s washing, he adored his mother and was proud of her contribution to the cause. The most he saw her was once or twice a month, when she arrived with her big breasts and important visitors, who were always ‘comrades from the Central Committee’. All of us children saw them too. My cousin Uri would be the first to spot the grey Kaiser parked by the Tsirkin house and to inform the rest of us. ‘They’re here again to smell the cow shit and have their pictures taken with the calves and the radishes.’

In a world in which his mother came and went, Meshulam was always on the lookout for a tolerable niche. He stayed clear of the imaginative mazes in which other children lost their way. The old pioneers wove a different web for him than for me. He devoted his keen memory and thirst for knowledge to research, documentation, and the collecting of historical artifacts, and found solace in perusing old by-laws, deciphering correspondence, and thumbing through papers so ancient that the ink fell apart at a touch.

Already as an adolescent he displayed several proud exhibits, each with a handwritten card: ‘Liberson’s Hoe’, ‘Milk Can, c. 1924’, ‘The First Plough (a product of the Goldman Bros. Smithy)’ and of course, ‘My Father’s Original Mandolin’. As he grew older he removed his father’s old sprayers, cans and rusty cultivator blades from the toolshed, retiled its roof, filled its two little rooms with broken kitchen utensils and decrepit furniture, and renamed it ‘Founder’s Cabin’. Rummaging through houses and farmyards, he found corroded flour sieves and washboards, copper pots that were green with age, and even an old mud sled.

‘I want everyone to know how people once lived here,’ he declared. ‘I want them to know that before the road was paved the carts sank into such deep mud every winter that the milk had to be brought to the dairy on sleds.’

He was especially proud of the gargantuan stuffed figure of Hagit, Eliezer Liberson’s half-Dutch half-Lebanese cow, who was once national champion in milk production and fat content. When Hagit grew old and Liberson’s son Daniel decided to sell her to the glue factory, Meshulam was up in arms. Calling for an emergency session of the village Committee, he protested that ‘so dedicated a comrade could not possibly be converted into sausages and gelatin. ‘Hagit,’ claimed Meshulam, ‘is not just an agricultural phenomenon. She is the definitive proof that pure Holstein cows were not suited for conditions in this country.’

The Committee paid Liberson to deed the cow to Meshulam and even offered to give her a small pension. That very day, however, Meshulam dispatched the dedicated comrade with a generous



portion of rat poison and stuffed her huge frame with the help of the veterinarian.

For years Hagit stood stinking of embalming fluids on the front porch of the Tsirkin house, her fumed udders dripping formaldehyde while alfalfa stems dangled from her mouth. Meshulam regularly brushed her coat, which had large bald spots from the rat poison, polished her bovine glass eyes, and sewed up her cracked hide to keep the sparrows from stealing blades of straw and tufts of cotton wool for their nests.

The stuffed cow revolted the entire village, and especially Zeitser, who had been most attached to Hagit and her prodigious flow of milk, which he considered to be 'a symbol of our national renaissance'. Sometimes he stole from our yard for a look at her. Each time he was face to face with her, he told us, he was seized by a combination of 'horror and longing'.

'The poor cow,' he murmured to himself. 'Meshulam Tsirkin stuffed her with more straw than Liberson ever gave her to eat in her whole lifetime.'

My irreverent cousin Uri, however, who looked down on the village from his mockingbird's-eye view, was sure that the stuffed cow had nothing to do with Meshulam's historical research.

'Hagit's udders reminded him of his mother,' he said to me. 'It's that simple.' And I looked at him as I do to this day; with love and with envy.

Our village has many visitors. Busloads of tourists and school-children come to see the flourishing creation of the founding fathers. Excitedly they stroll the village streets, oohing and aahing over every pear and chicken and breathing in the smells of earth and milk. Their tours always end in my cemetery on the old Mirkin farm.

Meshulam demanded that no tourist buses be allowed into the village and Pioneer Home unless they also stopped at Founder's Cabin for a look at Hagit and the gold medal from the British High Commissioner that hung around her stuffed neck.

Pioneer Home was anathema to the whole village, but Meshulam Tsirkin hated it especially. The buses that rolled up to it, the wide-eyed children, the enchanted tourists who strolled agog among its freshly washed headstones and rosebushes, reading in whispers the legendary names in copper letters and drinking the cold fruit juice that Busquilla's younger brother sold them from a pitcher at the entrance gate – all this made his blood boil.

Meshulam Tsirkin hated my cemetery because I refused to bury his mother. I buried only Grandfather's friends of the Second Aliyah.

'I'm very sorry,' I said to him when he waved the *Trade Union Yearbook* in my face with an article about his mother's contribution to the Workers' Co-operative Credit Fund. 'Your mother came to this country after the First World War, when the Second Aliyah was over.'

'The deceased does not comply with our entrance requirements,' explained Busquilla.

When Meshulam threatened to appeal to the institutions of the Movement, I reminded him that I had already done so after old Liberson put out *The pioneers' album*, in which he refused to publish a photograph of Pesya for reasons similar to ours.

'Besides which,' said Busquilla, 'your father couldn't stand to have her near him when she was alive either.'

What most got Meshulam's goat were the lead coffins I brought from the airport. He knew that every new casket from America filled my old sacks with tens of thousands of dollars.

'By what right do you bury traitors who left this country, and not my own mother?' he screamed at me.

'Whoever came to this country with the Second Aliyah can buy a plot here,' I replied.

'You mean to tell me that any little fart who came here from Russia, chucked it all after two weeks of hoeing crabgrass, and went traipsing off to America can be buried here as a pioneer? Just look

that!’ he shouted, pointing to one of the headstones. ‘Rosa Munkin, the archfiend in person!’

Rosa Munkin, who had known Grandfather back in Makarov, was my first customer.

‘Shall I tell you about Rosa Munkin?’ asked Meshulam contemptuously after the outcry that arose when her pink headstone was unveiled beside Grandfather’s grave. ‘Rosa Munkin came here from the Ukraine, worked for a week in an almond grove in Rehovot, didn’t like what the country did to her lily-white hands, and bombarded the whole world with SOSs. A brother of hers who had emigrated to America, a little bandit who became a pioneer Jewish gangster in Brooklyn, sent her a ticket to join him.’

Meshulam planted a foot on the pink marble slab in a gesture of patronising disdain.

‘During the First World War, when your grandparents and my father and Eliezer Liberson nearly starved to death and Zeitser was conscripted into the Turkish army, Rosa Munkin bought her four-piece corset shop in the Bronx. When the Feysge Levin Workingman’s Circle was settling this village, Rosa Munkin saw the light, married a Rabbi Shneour from Baltimore, and began publishing anti-Zionist advertisements in the papers. During the Second World War, when your poor uncle Efrayim was wounded with the British commandoes, she was widowed, leased a suite in a Miami hotel, and ran her brother’s casinos from there. In the files of the FBI she’s known as “the Red Queen” to this day.

‘And now,’ he yelled, ‘she’s buried in your ground. In the earth of this Valley. A pioneer. A builder. A founding mother.’

‘God rest her soul,’ said Busquilla. He went over to the stone, politely removed Meshulam’s foot, took a flannel rag from his pocket, and wiped the ‘a’ in ‘Rosa’.

‘You shut up, Busquilla,’ said Meshulam, turning white. ‘Shits like you should snap to attention when the founders are being discussed.’

‘The deceased paid one hundred thousand dollars,’ said Busquilla, to whom such slights meant nothing.

‘Mafia money,’ sneered Meshulam.

‘Meshulam, what do you want from me?’ I said. ‘She came with the Second Aliyah.’

‘And Shulamit?’ screamed Meshulam. ‘Did she come with the Second Aliyah too?’

‘Don’t be a wise guy,’ I shot back angrily. ‘Shulamit is a private family matter.’

When Rosa Munkin’s letter arrived from America, Grandfather and Shulamit, his old love who came from Russia half a century after him – ‘the Crimean whore,’ as Fanya Liberson called her – were the only people buried in the orchard. Busquilla, who was the village postman at the time, came galloping up on Zis, the post office donkey, shouting, ‘An aerogram! An aerogram! A letter from America!’

I was watering the year-round Burbank roses I had planted by Grandfather’s and Shulamit’s grave.

Luther Burbank had also left home because of a tragic love affair. And though Grandfather often told me about Burbank’s fruit trees, prickleless prickly pears, and light-skinned potatoes, it was to my uncle Avraham’s twin sons Uri and Yosi that he read the passage about Burbank’s unrequited love which made me so jealous that I almost burst into tears.

I slammed the door of the cabin and went outside, where through the window I heard Grandfather continue to read as if oblivious to my torment: “‘The truth is that I was very deeply fond of a beautiful young lady who seemed to me, I remember, less ardent than I was. A trifling disagreement, two positive natures, probably hasty words – and I determined that my heart was broken. To be frank, I think I gave that affair to many as my reason for coming West.’”

‘Don’t shout,’ I scolded Busquilla. ‘This is one place where I won’t have any shouting.’

He handed me the envelope and stood waiting by my side.

Busquilla arrived in the village in the early fifties, when Grandfather was still alive and I was still h

child. Walking into the village co-op, he stood by the till where Shlomo Levin was seated. Busquilla, who was wearing loafers and a funny blue beret on his head, glanced down at the counter while pleasureably slurping a bottle of grapefruit juice. Levin was mumbling numbers as he added up the customer's bill.

'Two pounds fifty-four,' said Busquilla over Levin's shoulder before the storekeeper's pencil had finished the first column of numbers.

Levin's personal history had made him highly sensitive to *kibitzers*, people who advised you without being asked. There was nothing he liked less than feeling he was under surveillance, and turning around, he gave the uninvited guest an angry stare. The man, he saw at once, belonged to the transit camp for new immigrants that had been hastily erected on the hill beyond the eucalyptus woods, where it aroused the village's scorn and compassion. The villagers volunteered to help the newcomers, gave them surplus farm produce, and showed them how to use their work tools, but once back in the village they regaled each other with tales about the little men in blue berets who did nothing but drink, play cards, and shoot craps all day while 'longing for their caves in Morocco and wiping their rear ends with stones'.

The affront was so great that Levin sat there open-mouthed. He said nothing, however, and turned to the next customer.

'One pound seventeen,' announced Busquilla before Levin had even drawn a line beneath the numbers he had written down.

Shlomo Levin, who had managed the village store for decades, rose, doffed his cap, and demanded to know to whom he was speaking.

'Busquilla, Mordecai,' said the amazing newcomer. Sucking up the last of his juice, he added 'Newly arrived from Morocco and looking for work.'

'So I see,' said Shlomo Levin.

In Morocco Busquilla had taught arithmetic and written letters in three languages for the courts and government offices. Now he was seeking a job as a book-keeper, a teacher, or a worker in the poultry incubator.

'I have a soft spot for baby chicks, children, and money,' he explained.

Though Levin was taken aback, he told Liberson, who was then the village treasurer, about the new immigrant.

'The man's got cheek, but he knows his arithmetic,' he said.

Busquilla's request was received sympathetically, although his weakness for money was held against him by most of the Committee members. 'Not to mention the beret,' said Uri. 'No one with any principles would ever wear anything but a worker's cap.'

'We discussed the matter in terms of our values, the overall needs of the new immigrants, and Busquilla's areas of competence,' Eliezer Liberson told me, 'and decided to try him out at onion picking.'

After two years, in the course of which Busquilla was indentured to the earth in such menial jobs as spraying insecticide, thinning corn, hoeing weeds, and picking fruit, the village postman heard the hyena laughing in the fields, lost his mind, bought a black crayon, and appointed himself censor of outgoing mail. The Committee fired him and gave his job and donkey to Busquilla. Busquilla planted Moroccan herbs around the post office, brewed spicy tea that had a maddening aroma, and won general approval by introducing home mail pick-up, thus saving the inhabitants the bother of betaking themselves to the village centre.

I opened the envelope. Since Shulamit's arrival from Russia, there had been no letters from abroad.

'What's in it, Baruch?' asked Busquilla discreetly.

‘It’s private,’ I told him.

~~He backed off a few steps and leaned against Shulamit’s gravestone, waiting to be asked to translate the letter.~~

‘It’s from some old lady in America,’ he informed me after a glance at it. ‘Her name is Rosa Munkin. She’s from your grandfather’s hometown. She was here many years ago, worked with him in Rishon-le-Tsiyyon and Rehovot, and thought the world of him. Someone wrote to her that you buried him at home, and she wants to be buried here too when she dies, right next to him.’

He handed me back the envelope. ‘There’s more in it,’ he said.

Inside was a cheque made out to me for ten thousand dollars.

‘This is just the down payment,’ Busquilla said. ‘She’s a very sick woman and won’t live much longer. Her lawyer will bring the rest of the money with her.’

‘What am I supposed to do with this?’ I asked, confused. ‘It isn’t even real money.’

‘You’ll need help, Baruch,’ said Busquilla softly. ‘We’re talking big money. We’re talking foreigners. We’re talking English. We’re talking lawyers and the Committee and income tax. You’ll never manage it by yourself.’

With ten thousand dollars, I thought, I could plant the most fabulous trees around Grandfather’s grave, Judas trees, flame trees, white oleanders. I could lay a path of red gravel from Grandfather to Shulamit. I could go looking for my lost uncle Efrayim or pay to have old Zeister’s stomach complaints taken care of.

‘Don’t breathe a word of this to anyone, Baruch,’ said Busquilla. ‘Not a soul. Not even your cousin Uri.’

That evening Busquilla came to the cabin with a black typewriter and wrote a letter for me in English. Rosa Munkin answered it, and three months later, in the middle of the night, she arrived personally in a shiny coffin, chaperoned by a lawyer with a headful of hair, a slick suit, and a smell of aftershave lotion such as had never perfumed the air of our village before. Vile and elegant, he stood watching me dig the grave.

‘Just look at him,’ Busquilla whispered. ‘I know the type. This isn’t the first corpse he’s buried in the middle of the night.’

The lawyer sat in the dark on Grandfather’s grave, dangled his polished shoes, and chewed on a blade of straw while disgustedly sniffing the odours of the village that came wafting on the warm night air from the cowsheds and chicken coops.

We lowered Rosa Munkin into the soil of the Valley. The American took a slip of paper and a skullcap from his pocket, recited a brief prayer in an incomprehensible Hebrew, instructed me to make a square concrete base for the headstone, and reached for a black attaché case in the back of his huge estate car. Busquilla counted the banknotes with a quick, moistened finger and made out a receipt.

A few days later the lawyer returned with a fancy stone of polished pink marble. To this day, among the grey and white stones chiselled out of local rock, Rosa Munkin’s grave resembles a big box of candy.

I stashed the money away in the cowshed. Zeister was asleep there, covered by the old army blanket that had been in his possession since the Great War, dead to the world. Then I returned with Busquilla to the cabin, where we sat at Grandfather’s table drinking tea and eating bread with olives.

‘I’m sure you’ll want to tell your uncle Avraham and Pinness,’ he advised me. ‘Don’t do it just yet though. Wait a little while.’

The next day Busquilla quit his job at the post office and put himself at my disposal.

‘I’ll manage the business, and you can pay me what you think I’m worth,’ he said.

That was the beginning of Grandfather’s vengeance, which was carried out with the prophetic exactitude of a good planter, filled my sacks with money, and wreaked havoc on the most sensitive

nerve centres of the village.

~~‘They drove my son Efrayim from here,’ he repeated to me and Pinness one last time before his death. ‘But I’ll get them where it hurts the most: in the earth.’~~

We didn’t know then what he was talking about.

The Committee considered several candidates to fill Busquilla’s position at the post office and finally settled on Zis. The donkey already knew every house in the village, and now that it was riderless, could carry packages too. Zis was the grandson of Katchke, a charter member of the village who had hauled water from the spring every day until he was murdered by a snake.

Zis, however, did not even last two years. ‘The old-timers discovered that he was licking the stamps off the envelopes,’ said my sardonic cousin Uri.

The Committee appealed to Busquilla to return to his old job, but by then he had a business card that said ‘Manager, Pioneer Home’ in Hebrew and in English, plus ‘a herd of one hundred corpses’, and old Liberson sarcastically put it until the death of his wife Fanya, his first and only love, who became the hundred and first.

The Mirkin farm was one of the most successful in the village.

So everyone said enthusiastically whenever Grandfather's fruit trees broke into stormy bloom; they said when my uncle Avraham's cows gushed floods of milk; so they said, upset and envious when the cowshed filled with dusty insect moults and bulging sacks of money while the orchard went to ruin and was sown with bones and graves.

The graves ran in rows on either side of red and white gravel paths. Scattered among them were green benches, flowering shrubs, trees, and shady corners for meditation, and in the middle was Grandfather's white gravestone. The whole village shook its head at the sad fate of earth that was meant to bring forth fruit and fodder but had become a great field of revenge.

'It's really quite simple,' I told myself, wandering through the large rooms of my house. 'Why keep picking at it, prying and looking for answers?'

Wasn't that why Grandfather had raised me to be what I was? He had made me as big and strong as an ox and as faithful and savage as a sheepdog, thick-skinned and thick-headed. And now he lies in his grave, surrounded by dead friends and tickled pink by the village's connivances.

'Leave him alone. The child is nothing but a bag of yarns and tall tales,' said Pinness when he announced that I had no intention of appearing before the Committee for a hearing.

I was no longer a child. I was a rich young giant, burdened with my money and my bulk. Pinness, however, had a way of extending his pupils' childhoods to all ages, continuing to pat them on heads that had long since grown bald or grey. 'Who knows how many memories were crammed into that boy's big body until it just burst and spilled its bile?' he asked rhetorically. If Grandfather had been alive, he would have dismissed such a remark by saying that although Pinness knew many fine parables, 'he sometimes forgets what they're about'.

When asked to abandon the mortuary business, I myself always replied, 'I'm only doing what Grandfather wanted.' I sent Busquilla and his hired lawyer to the Committee hearing because they were outsiders, as smooth as they were crude. The fallen leaves of stories had not covered them, and the soles of their shoes kept the Valley's fine dirt off their feet. I pictured the scrape of spartan chairs in the Committee room, the broken-nailed hands drumming like hooves on the table. Let the two of them face those stalwart eyes for me, those rough fingers jabbing the air.

I was only Grandfather's little child, doing what he wanted. I had nothing more to say.

In Odessa Grandfather and his brother Yosef boarded the *Ephratos*, a small, filthy ship 'full of bad people' that plied the Mediterranean and Black seas. Like two sides of the same coin, Ya'akov and Yosef Mirkin saw different halves of the world. 'My brother was excited, tempestuous. He paced back and forth in the prow of the ship, looking straight ahead.'

Yosef nurtured dreams of white donkeys, Hebrew power, and Jewish homesteads in the mountains of Gilead. Grandfather thought of Shulamit, who had stayed behind after threshing his flesh with the flails of deceit and jealousy, and of Palestine, which was for him but a refuge from crimes of passion, a land beyond the borders of memory where he and his wounds might grow scar tissue.

He sat in the stern of the ship and gazed at the water, his bare heart unravelling behind him in the foam. 'Can't you see? Our warm hearts come apart like balls of twine,' he wrote in a note long years

later.

~~During their days at sea, when all they ate was bread and dried figs, Ya'akov and Yosef Mirkin vomited incessantly.~~

'We arrived in this country and headed north. By summer Yosef and I were on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.' Grandfather's hand travelled back and forth, shovelling mashed potatoes mixed with homemade yoghurt and salty fried onions into my mouth. 'The first night we found work guarding the fields, and at dawn we sat down to see how the sun rose in the Promised Land. It came up at half past four. By quarter past five it was trying to kill us. Yosef hung his head and started to cry. That was how he had imagined the day of redemption.'

Now his hands were busy with the salad. 'We were three friends. Mandolin Tsirkin, Eliezer Liberson, and me. My brother Yosef fell ill, couldn't take any more, and ran away to America.'

Hot, weak, and irritable, Grandfather oscillated between attacks of malaria and spasms of anger and longing.

Yosef made it big in California. 'When we were still walking around wrapped in burlap in winter, our socks stuffed with newspapers to keep out the cold, he was selling suits to bourgeois Americans. When the village was hooked up to electricity a few months before Grandmother Feyge died and Yosef sent a money order so they could buy a refrigerator, Grandfather threw the letter into the slop ditch by the cowshed and told Grandmother that he would never touch 'the dollars of a capitalist traitor'. Yosef then went to Santa Rosa, Luther Burbank's small and beloved farm that attracted sentimental hordes of visitors, insects, and fan mail, and sent Grandfather a signed photograph of the great planter. I saw him in the trunk beneath Grandfather's bed with his straw hat, polka dot tie, and fleshy earlobes. 'But even a gesture like that couldn't reconcile Mirkin.'

Fanya Liberson was Grandmother's best friend.

'Feyge, who was already sick and weak, short of breath and love, came to me in tears,' she said after I had pestered her for hours, following her expectantly about. 'But not even we could convince your grandfather. He made her go on carrying those big blocks of ice for the icebox.'

'And your friend Mirkin was her biggest ice block of all,' Fanya said another time to her husband. Grandmother Feyge's sufferings and death still haunted her and made her furious anew each time she thought of them.

I couldn't hear Eliezer Liberson's murmured answer. Crouched by their house, my face pressed to the wet slats of the blinds, I saw only his lips as they moved, and her beautiful, bright old head laid across his chest.

Grandfather never forgave his brother and never saw him again. It was only after his death that he had Yosef exhumed and his bones brought from California to our Valley. His two sons, joint owners of the Mirkin & Mirkin Textile Company of Los Angeles, sent me a cheque for ninety thousand dollars.

'Your father was a capitalist traitor,' Busquilla wrote to them on the official stationery of Pioneer Home, 'but we are still giving you a ten per cent discount because he was a member of the family.'

The dead arrived in hosed-down farm trucks, in carts hitched to tractors, in the bellies of airplanes, in wooden coffins and lead caskets.

Sometimes there were big funerals with huge crowds and reporters and sweating troops of Veterans and politicians. Busquilla greeted them with scraping, sinuous gestures that disgusted me. They watched me dig the grave, shrinking back from the shower of earth I sent flying, while urging Busquilla to make his worker hurry up.

Other bodies came unattended, accompanied only by a bill of lading and a note with the inscription requested for the gravestone. Some were interred by a single angry son or weeping daughter. Some arrived alive, crawling through the fields with their last breath to be buried in Pioneer Home.

'With my old comrades,' they said. 'Next to Mirkin,' they pleaded. 'In the earth of the Valley.'

Before burying them, I opened their coffins in the shed by Busquilla's office to have a look at them. I had to make sure that no one ineligible was smuggled in.

The 'capitalist traitors' who arrived from America were already slightly decomposed. Their carnal frivolity moulted, they stared at me with fishy, apologetic eyes rheumy with supplication. The other comrades from the Valley were very quiet, as if napping under a tree in the fields. Many of them knew from their visits to Grandfather or Zeitser when I was a boy, in their hands a gnawed branch, an old letter, or a leaf attacked by aphids that they had come to consult about. Others I knew only from stories, from answers to questions I had asked, and from what I had had to imagine myself.

Grandfather brought me to his cabin wrapped in a blanket when I was two years old. He washed the soot off me and picked the splinters of glass and wood from my skin. He raised me, fed me, and taught me the secrets of trees and fruit.

And told me stories. As I ate. As I weeded. As I pruned the wild suckers of the pomegranate tree. As I slept.

'My son Efrayim had a little calf called Jean Valjean. Efrayim got up every morning, took Jean Valjean out for a walk on his back, and returned home at noon. He did that each day. "Efrayim," I said to him, "that's no way to raise a calf. It will get so used to it that it will never want to use its own legs." But Efrayim didn't listen. Jean Valjean grew bigger and bigger until he became a huge bull. And even then Efrayim insisted on carrying him everywhere ... That was my son Efrayim for you.'

'Where is Efrayim?'

'No one knows, my child.'

Though there were never tears in his eyes, the corners of his mouth sometimes trembled imperceptibly. Often, when the fruit trees were in blossom, or on an exceptionally fine day in the Valley, he told me about my uncle Efrayim's handsome looks.

'When he was still a little boy, the birds used to flock to his window to watch him wake up.'

'Now I'll tell you about your mother. Ah-h-h ... open your mouth, Baruch. She was an extraordinary young woman. Once, when she was a little girl, she was sitting on the pavement outside our cabin polishing the family's shoes: mine, and Grandmother Feyge's, and Uncle Avraham's, and Uncle Efrayim's, who still lived at home. Just then ... open your mouth, my child ... just then she saw a snake, a big viper, crawling slowly up the pavement, coming closer and closer.'

'And then?'

'And then ... one more bite. What happened then?'

'What?'

'Did your mother run away?'

I knew the story by heart.

'No!'

'Did she cry?'

'No!'

'Did she faint?'

'No!'

'Well now, Baruch, my child, finish what's in your mouth. Swallow. Your mother didn't faint. What did she do? What did your mother do?'

'She sat there without moving.'

'And the viper came slowly, slowly crawling up the pavement, puffing and hissing, *psss, psss, psss* until it was right next to your mother's bare foot. And then ... she took the big shoe brush and ...'

'Wham!'

'Right on the head of the snake.'



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