

in my youth. But there are no men in our town, no Jewish men. What few we had, escaped. They bribed officials, hired smugglers, crossed borders and left. Every year the number of eligible men diminishes. The young ones do all they can to flee from the prison we call home. And who can blame them? But our girls cannot do the same. The smugglers are rapists and the roads hazardous. Those few who tried paid with their lives, and served warning on other daughters of Israel to stay in their homes. So what will become of us, you tell me."

"Me? What can I say?"

"But you there, in *Eres-Israel*, you are all so brave and wise. What are you doing for us? What plans have you for us? What suggestions?"

I fell quiet. She blew her nose once, twice, three times, as if gathering strength. Then she continued.

"At least the eldest raised a family. Two sons, *roh sition* [upon grandmother's soul]. She tasted something of life. A few wretched years—she married an old man, an old widower (may God grant you his years). It's better than nothing, I say to her; and she does not agree. But the second daughter—she is . . . she is 40 years old. . . ."

The woman whispered this in my ear, as if divulging some awful, dreadful secret. "Forty years old and not a taste of real life, if you know what I mean. Is it not *Haram* [pitiful, and wrong]? Did the Master of the Universe create His creatures to live in solitude, to be barren, lonely, thirsting for life?"

Again she lowered her mouth to my ear, while her cupped fingers gave cover to her moving lips. That we were alone, with not a person in sight, she neither saw nor heard.

"A woman is also made of flesh and blood, may my lips not sin. A woman was meant to be married, not buried. How does my husband say it: a woman without a man is like a corpse without a grave. Her life is worse than death. Won't you agree?"

I nodded my head in agreement, swallowing a lump that stuck in my

throat. Out of her silent weeping a strange laughter suddenly erupted.

It was then that I remembered her. Through a fog. A peculiar, liberated, laugh. A faceless laugh. A girl whose mark was laughter. It was because of her laughter that I put her in fourth place. *La quatrième*. Whether it was my memory returning or a figment of my aroused imagination I do not know. The name, the voice, her manner of speaking, the eyes and this



laugh—it was all familiar somehow. Was it some primordial experience, or was it from a previous life?

"And the little one—she too is not young, but for me she'll always be my little one—her lot is undoubtedly the worst of all. A Moslem boy fell in love with her, followed her about as if moonstruck, kissed the soles of her feet. And she—her body was aflame, but her soul refused him with pride.

An intelligent young man, handsome, rich; but a *goy*. 'He pursues me in my dreams, mother,' she says to me. And I console her and give her courage. I promise her that a day will come when she will marry a Jewish boy. *Nasmalah*, a God-fearing man. You tell me—will that day come?"

"What can I say? What do I know?"
"You come from Jerusalem, no? All the *kibbusim* are near Jerusalem, on the mountains, to guard her, I know. If you have no answers, then who does? Who?"

I tried to distract her. "And you had no sons?"

"Why 'had'? I have, *maashallah*, four. Two left, fled, with God's help. One in Venezuela and the other in San Paulo. They raised families to be proud of, may the evil eye not harm them. Tomorrow or the next day they will arrive and go to their father in the hospital. The other two are with us, in our prison, they together with their families."

"And you said not a word about them."

"Men—that's a different matter. They leave in the morning for the 'market.' They are occupied all day with their business. And business, thank God, is good; nothing to complain about. There is not a Jew in town who does not earn his livelihood. And if one is temporarily in need, the S.T.E. comes to his aid."

"S.T.E.?"

"Seven Town Elders. Seven who volunteered to head the imprisoned community. What was I saying? Men have no worry. They take a wife and raise a family. Not so our women. Poor wretches, what will become of them? What will a woman of our kind do with her life without a husband to feed and children to bring up? She will not dance in cabarets or drive a taxi cab as they do here. She will not study medicine or law; the schools will not admit her, nor will the community accept her."

The cold water seemed to revive her. She pulled out a small mirror and began to repair her makeup, with the help of a nail and a finger.

"When will you return to Halab?"

"Depends on the doctors. And on God's will. If all goes well, in a month."

"You'll return to your prison."

"We'll return to our daughters. Our sons. Our grandchildren." And after a brief pause: "Tell me, you are a learned man. Has this happened before? Schooled as our nation is in persecutions and sorrows, has it ever known a calamity like ours? Women shut away for life. Thirty years. And the world simply goes on."

