

## **Lost and Found**

A modern day miracle in a Jerusalem alley

I have never been sure why anyone bothers to sit down and tell a story. By that I mean one that actually happened, something real and magical that touched and transformed one's life. Retelling a story is like chasing a spent bottle of old perfume as it rolls down a dark alleyway, hoping to recapture something of the nape of the woman who wore the original scent.

My life, blessed and complicated as it has unfolded, has been the story of loss and recovery, of otherness, loneliness and unimaginable bliss. That I made it out of my painful childhood and into the light of adulthood, surrounded and supported by love and by family, is a miracle I attribute mainly to the fact that I was deposited, by birthright, through no virtue of my own, under the wings of my angelic maternal grandfather.

I owe my life to my grandfather. To him I owe the gift of gratitude, the simple discovery of life and the unbridled joy that comes with that discovery. I knew none of it until my grandfather illuminated it for me. I saw none of it until my grandfather touched me with his kindness and walked me through my sorrows like a gentle shepherd. I owe my light to him.

Over the years I came to expect the miracle of my grandfather's presence. I adored him and I fully expected him to adore me in return. I trusted him to always be there. I imagine I took him for granted more times than not; tired of walking slowly by his side in the autumn of my childhood as he limped down the street, aging and failing, insisting on visiting yet another store, stopping to repeat a story, a joke, an anecdote I'd heard a million times before.

The day he died, life as I knew it came to an end. In practical terms, it inconvenienced me for a day, if that, but it devastated me for a lifetime. I was performing in a show, I had my obligations. Besides, a war was on and I was the son of a war hero, after all: chin up, bite the tongue, gaze blankly into space and whatever you do, don't let the bastards see you cry.

I stayed behind after the funeral was over and the family left. I shrieked and pounded the earth with my fists. I bit the dirt and spat gravel. I cursed him for leaving me. I begged forgiveness. I kissed his vanishing face.

Now, life would become the memory of my miracle, the legacy of a grandfather too good to be true. My grandfather, Rabbi Harry Davidowitz, who returned from his exile to Palestine in 1934, was gone and I would wander as far from his grave as possible, travel as far from my home as I could, go to any length to challenge the memory of the fading icon. All to no avail.

When I married and had my redemptive boys I told them, diligently, of my grandfather's love. I put them to sleep in his light, hummed his tunes in their ears and, finally, wrote and performed a theatre piece in his memory. All the love I have been able to give them was reflected love from him. I made sure to tell them that. I made sure that whatever embers of my lost childhood I could still fan would keep them warm.

All this I am telling you because of my latest journey to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is at the heart of this story, a fact that makes the retelling all the more strange. Jerusalem would be the last place on earth for me to recapture anything of my lost childhood, almost none of which was spent in Jerusalem. I never much liked Jerusalem as a child. I was a Tel-Aviv boy; a child of the sand dunes, the Bauhaus architecture, the Sycamore trees and the promise of the open sea. I would travel to Jerusalem with my family once a year and once a year only, out of prudence.

We'd climb into my Grandfather's Hillman and crawl, cramped and weary, through Bab El Wad, The Gate of the Wadi, the old Latrun Police station squinting suspiciously at us from across the green line. We'd snake upwards towards Jerusalem, our car panting and puffing, stalling at every opportunity it had, trying to delay the inevitable. Even our English car knew that one could easily drown in the holiness of Jerusalem and get lost in all that stone, lost in the maze of dark honeyed alleyways and strangely seductive languages, as though Babel had simply gone horizontal and clothed itself in pious limestone shawls.

Once in Jerusalem, we'd climb up the roof of a certain house and my father would hand me a pair of binoculars. "Look there," he'd point to the south, south east, "above the olive trees, close to mother Rachel". "See those hills?" my mother would ask. "Yes," I'd say. "See the sheep?" She'd ask. "Yes," I'd say. "That's it. That's our land. That's the land Great Grandfather Bloom bought for us. That's Bethlehem. That's our home."

We would not go to our home in Bethlehem. King Abdullah of Trans Jordan had seen to that in 1948. My home, apparently, was out of reach. A rolling wave of stones, olive trees and sheep, under a sea of merciless blue, was my unknowable home. "I'll sing you about it tonight, when you go to bed," my mother would say softly, from somewhere far away. My father, who understood loss better than any of us, would just pat me on the head, silently, and turn to descend the stairway back to the alley, his binoculars dangling from his neck like shackles.

Fifty years later, on a crisp summer night this past July, during my most recent visit to Israel, my wife and I were sitting on the veranda of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, looking out on the walls of the old city, sipping tea infused with freshly cut mint. We were enjoying the quiet retreat from our hotel down the street which had become unbearably noisy and crowded.

The genteel air of the veranda belied the violent past of the stately hotel, still resonant with the ghosts of another era, a time when British officials mixed with Jewish aspirants and Arab dignitaries, poets, diplomats, merchants, soldiers and dreamers.

We spoke of my grandmother, the theatre critic, and the British officers' club she ran as a cover for her spying activities on behalf of the nascent Jewish Nation; we spoke of my grandfather, the Lithuanian born Rabbi-turned translator and his love for Shakespeare and Chaucer and all things English.

I breathed the stars and drank the honey-suckled air. How had I come to love Jerusalem after all these years, with all its loss, with all its broken promises? How had I managed to escape the suffocating ghosts my mother had so feared, the distance my father could perceive so sharply with his unerring pilot's eyes? Somehow, I had come home from my exile to be comforted by the passion of the stones. I had come to admire the courage of witnesses, even the unforgiving ones whose hearts had turned to rock. Living far from my home had somehow taught me the virtue of patience, the quality of true yearning.

The next morning my wife and I set out for a walk though the city. It was mercilessly hot that day, and walking uphill on asphalt, stone and gravel had seared that fact into our marrow. Arriving at a small alley I said: "Let's turn here, we were here once before, we were looking for something."

"We were never here before," my wife replied, "and we certainly weren't looking for anything, but if you'd like to turn here that's fine with me." And so we turned. As the street curved to the right and sloped downwards, almost apologetically, we saw a book store ahead of us on the left hand side of the street.

The store was a chaotic mess of books strewn everywhere, perched like driftwood upon the dusty shores of ugly tables, book stands, chairs and cardboard boxes. Books of all sizes, illustrated, illuminated, dull, decaying, vibrant, beige, black, grey, thick and painfully thin books stared at us as though they had been starved for our visit for hundreds of years. It was a book lover's paradise: overgrown, untrimmed, wild and alluring. One quick glance revealed some quality publications of early Israeli literature from the twenties and thirties, the very stuff I was fed as a child by my Grandfather the Rabbi, the scholar, the absentminded angel.

“Might you have any Shakespeare translated into the Hebrew by Shalom Tzvi Davidowitz?” I asked the owner, who sat perched over a volume of sacred Jewish text like a distracted entomologist, examining inferior larvae of a common house ant. “No.” He said, barely moving his lips, yet, somehow producing a dismissive smile from the locked garden of his indifference. “He was the first to translate all of Shakespeare's works into Hebrew,” I said. The pious scientist gave no sign of having heard me. “Rabbi Harry Davidowitz, he won the Tchernichovsky Prize, he helped write the first draft of Israel's Declaration of Independence.”

“Is that so?” Muttered the owner, raising his eyelids wearily, as though having just been informed by his podiatrist that a particularly nasty fungus had been discovered beneath his large toe. He mumbled something under his graying mustache, stroked his beard, as though comforting a stray dog, and sank back into his book.

I looked around the store. In the back room, up two stairs, old posters of Hollywood movies filmed in Israel were on display, leaning against the peeling walls, like family photos, left over by previous owners. “Any posters of *Cast a Giant Shadow*?” The owner shook his head from side to side, not even bothering to speak. “My father was the stunt pilot for the film,” I said.

“Hmm” replied the owner, having just found a particularly troublesome Aramaic word. “Well, two down.” I said with a smile.

I ruffled through poetry books and novels by some of my favorite Hebrew writers, delighted by a few obscure volumes I had not seen since sleeping over at my grandparents’ home on 11, Arnon Street, back when Tel-Aviv was still a city in Vienna and the Mediterranean was a painting hung behind each westward facing window. “Have you read Amos Oz’s *A Tale of Love and Darkness*?” I asked. His eminence lifted his aching soul from his heavy book. “I don’t read frivolous literature” he sneered, “I prefer the depth and beauty of our sacred heritage.”

It was clearly time to leave. As I moved towards the doorway, the sun almost reaching out to me from the blazing sidewalk outside the store, something unusual caught my eye. Unusual, that is, within the context of this pious Jewish bookstore. A Cross, a large gilded Cross on the broad spine of a tall, Prussian-Blue book, was calling me: “How could you leave without examining me first? Me, here, in this store, of all stores; under the baleful eye of this shepherd, of all shepherds!” The shelf on which it lived was filled with books about the Crusades, a subject dear to my heart for many reasons, not the least of them being that I come from a family of crusaders, on my father’s side. Nostalgia, perhaps, or guilt. I am connected to this land in many strange and mysterious ways.

I scanned the shelf and looked back at the owner, wondering if he’d gathered these volumes into his store to keep a better eye on them. Or was there, perhaps, a darker, more satisfying secret he was keeping? Guessing that no answer was going to be offered, I turned back to the Crusades, running my eyes over hills and valleys, following the fortresses and battle fields until the corner bent my eyes to a new wall, free of knights and castles.

Somewhere, between two fat books, jockeying for better position on the tilting wooden shelf, a small, yellowing book, its wordless spine barely visible between the neighboring volumes, drew me to it for no apparent reason. I reached between the hefty books and pulled it out

I glanced down at the book and noticed my hands were trembling. Odd, I thought, it wasn't that hard extracting it. I opened the book and my eyes went very blurry and wet. Every hair on my body was standing on end. I stared at it again, not comprehending, and handed it to my wife. Mumbling: Oh, God, Oh God, like a rain-soaked mantra, I ran out into the street and whirled around weeping: Oh, God, Oh God!

Standing where I had left her, my wife looked at the Hebrew script, written in fading ink, on the inside cover of the thin book of Shakespeare's "A Winter's Tale" I had just deposited in her hands, and read: *"To my sweet grandson, Danny, from Grandpa, the translator, with much love. Harry S. Davidowitz."*

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