

## The Secret Garden

He places the bead of black tar on the spoon. He can see his reflection inside the silver spoon, one of his mother's kosher spoons for Passover. His upside-down, bald oval head looks like the "alien head" Saul gave him one night in the barracks. He held his watch next to his shorts and asked him, "Hey Avi, is this the right time?" and when Avi looked down he saw Saul's testicle, the alien head, sticking out from his shorts.

As he holds the needle inside his water bottle and watches it suck up the liquid into the syringe, which is also his diabetic mother's, he contemplates the irony of the fact that she is now providing him with more than the simple act of giving birth or nurturing his body. He adds the water onto the spoon with the black bead, and it now looks like a little island of black hope, the only hope he now has left since the day he returned from Gaza.

He rolled into Gaza with his fellows. They all were laughing and joking about the girls they were with the night before inside a Tel Aviv dance club. Saul had ordered a bunch of chick peas and told the girls to sit next to each other and open their mouths wide, like baby birds. He told them he was the "world's best grenade launcher" and that he practiced by tossing garbanzo beans. Each one of the girls received a tossed bean in her mouth; he didn't miss even one! They all sang "Hatikvah," standing at attention, and then

they crashed against each other, out on the dance floor, rocking in convulsive laughter, as the band played the latest heavy metal.

His tee-shirt has an inscription on the front of it written in Hebrew letters: "Gaza was a free fire zone." That day comes back to him now as he heats the bottom of the spoon with his lighter. He stirs the black island with the plunger of his syringe. *"Avi, get your ass over there and get that kid. We got reports they were firing on us from this house." He looks back at his lieutenant, his eyes questioning and expectant. "Go inside, goddammit! Use the kid as a shield. They won't fire on a kid." He does as he is told. The kid's face looks unafraid and determined as Avi duck-walks him inside the shack. The stink of the place overcomes him, a mixture of burnt cooking oil and human excrement. His Uzi peeks out from under the kid's arm, like a New Year's bottle rocket, and that's when the kid begins to smile. A huge, swarthy grin that scares him. The shots ring out. The kid is hit, falls backward into Avi's arms like a rag doll, like the black dot that is melting in the spoon. Avi fires back, just as the young woman fires her pistol and screams, as she falls to the sandy floor, writhing in agony inside her black chador. He, also, falls to the floor, wounded in the leg. He shouts out to his lieutenant, who is safe inside his tank, "You better get your ass in here, Lieutenant. It's a mistake. It's one big mistake in here!"* The black island of hope is now melted inside the concave of the spoon. He rolls the bead of cotton between his fingertips, places it gingerly on the spoon, and the liquid

fills it like Paradise being sucked into a cloud. He dips the tip of the needle into the infused cotton and pulls the plunger back—pulls the trigger back—pulls his soul back into his body, ready for the peace to take over.

He picks up the article published by Amnesty International. He wants to re-read the special part as he is injecting. It always gives him a feeling of importance when he turns on. He doesn't feel like the isolated, dying corporal living with his mother inside an apartment in Tel Aviv. He feels like an important journalist, reporting the facts to the world who will finally listen:

*I learned early on that war forms its own culture. The rush of battle is a potent and often lethal addiction, for war is a drug, one I ingested for many years. It is peddled by myth makers--historians, war correspondents, filmmakers novelists and the state--all of whom endow it with qualities it often does possess: excitement, exoticism, power, chances to rise above our small stations in life, and a bizarre and fantastic universe that has a grotesque and dark beauty. It dominates culture, distorts memory, corrupts language and infects everything around it, even humor, which becomes preoccupied with the grim perversities of smut and death. Fundamental questions about the meaning, or meaninglessness, of our place on the planet are laid bare when we watch those around us sink to the lowest depths. War exposes the capacity for evil that lurks just below the surface within all*

*of us. And so it takes little in wartime to turn ordinary men into killers. Most give themselves willingly to the seduction of unlimited power to destroy, and all feel the peer pressure. Few, once in battle, can find the strength to resist.*

His mother told him they were once brothers and sisters. Muslims and Jews have the same laws of *kashrut*: no pork, no shell fish, nothing without fins or scales, no animal that is a predator. Together, they faced the invading Infidels from Christian Europe--the Crusaders--who had the practice of eating the "body and blood" of their god, Jesus. To Muslims and Jews, Yahweh can never be a flesh-and-blood man. Never shall we eat the flesh of any human or prophet. He knew they had more cultural practices in common with the Muslims than they had with the Christians. And yet, now the Christians were our allies against the Muslims. How can that be so?

We pack our cultural allies into their refugee camp in Gaza, put up our militant walls and check-points all around; we must know all about them, their comings and goings, as if they were an alien race or species--not our brothers and sisters in culture--all because of this land we call our own, and they call their own, and all of our leaders exploit the differences to acquire power and wealth over the other. It is so clear to him now. Exploitation and greed are at the crux of their problems--on both sides--and now the mediator must move in to fill the bottomless crevice between them.

*I am the new Messhiach! This is how it's going to be, from this day forward! We shall share collectively what we have. We shall return to the barter system--no more tricky investments based on complicated algorithms that only the rich can comprehend--a simple exchange of goods and services to maintain a healthy and mediated lifestyle. No, and it is not Communism. I say unto you, we are all human beings, and our brains have become our worst enemies! The brain seeks to divide us, to make us puppets to these masters who would use us for their profit, to make us like dreamers after their dreams, not our own. And so it shall be, I am the alien prophet, from another planet, a planet where peace and brotherhood reigns supreme over all. If you do not share, if you do not hold each other in utmost regard, then I will unleash my infinite power of Judgment upon you!*

He sets the filled needle down for a moment and picks up a collection of photos. As he turns the pages, memories are injected into him like the drug he needs to stay alive. His mother holds him in her arms at the same hospital where she now works. He was born on February 24, 1992. He was a Pisces, "very creative but subject to being too much of a dreamer," his mother told him. There he is at his *Bar Mitzvah*, standing tall in his blue prayer shawl and reciting his *Torah* portion, the part about Job giving up his selfish plea of innocence to G\_d and becoming resigned to the omniscient power of his Maker. There he is standing tall in his IDF uniform; his face sunburned from training in the Negev, his grin so self-assured and brimming

with confidence that has now left him forever. Finally, there he is in the hospital bed, his mother standing beside him; she stares out at the camera, a Mona Lisa in her nurse's role. He sets the photo album down and picks the needle up again. He stares at it. *I shall go forth and inject this into all Mankind so they can at last be at peace with themselves! It is the only peace I know, and it will be the only peace they will ever know. There is no peace greater than the peace of the poppy! Oh, noble flower, blooming in the desert, I share your grace with the multitudes. Like the Prophet Jesus, I will make many fishes out of one fish, many loaves out of one loaf, and many injections out of this one! May this be the one to give me the power--the eternal power to control my destiny!*

The needle goes inside the crook of his arm, laid out along that red river Styx, and the smile creeps into his face, the smile of the boy, the smile of the culture of war, and his alien head falls forward to rest on his chest. He hums "*Hatikvah*," and waits for the sun to go down.

Darkness brings a calm he can finally endure, as his mother enters from the hospital, and he will once again hold her by her thin shoulders, she is getting so very thin these days, look into her dark eyes, and ask, "So Eema? How goes the battle?"

She looks up at him, a sad, knowing face that perhaps had looked up at many other prophets and sons, in many other times and places, neither passing judgment nor unduly praising. She just stares.

He, in his reverie, goes over to the CD player on the little antique Russian table his mother has kept for five generations of Kochinskys. His father, long ago passing into the night of forgotten dreams, does not hold sway anymore. She is the queen of this home. He is her prince.

He plays the music and it invokes in her a time from her youth, when children ran freely inside the *kibbutz*, the socialist farm. All were parents to these children; all were responsible for their welfare. There was no selfishness imposed by the outside, capitalist forces of the "free market." The children, his mother among them, ran, danced and played their infinite variety of games, going from one new parent to another, never discriminating, never questioning their love, never feeling ashamed or fearful that there would come a time when there might be no parent to guard them. The song was a folk song from the *kibbutzim*, and he caught his mother up in his arms, and they danced as if time stood still, as if there were no more wars for land, for pride, for religion or even for G\_d. There was only the completed circle of love, alienated from the times to come, frozen in a moment of devotion and joy inside a song of hope.

After their dance, she sits down next to him on the small divan, and he lays his alien head down in her skinny lap and closes his eyes. She whispers to him, as he tries to sleep, and the words encircle his mind like another kind of drug. "This crisis will pass if you can just understand that you are free without their pressures, without their intoxicants to blind you. The

tumor on your brain also contains the light of new beginnings. Don't be afraid, my son. The light of the Zohar, the *ein sof*, is in you. The secret Garden, in worlds of light hidden...its splendor sends forth to the ends of Creation, in the fullness of glory and is revealed in its beauty to the eyes made seeing--the Garden of Eden."