

A
FORGETTABLE
MAN

*Set me as a seal upon thine heart,
as a seal upon thine arm:
for love is as strong as death...*

Solomon's Songs
Ch8, verse 6

Robert Golden

Copyright © 2012 Robert Golden
All rights reserved.
ISBN-978-0-9563021-4-4

For T and J, O, I and N

Many thanks to Tina Ellen Lee who ignored my typing in the middle of many nights, and to Geoffrey Frosh, Siobhan Evans, Belinda Drake, Nan Winton and Elizabeth Dench for aid, comfort and support.

PART 1

CHAPTER 1

The cracked bell vibrated against the corroded chrome hammer, rattling the wooden wall it had been hung on thirty summers before. Years of sand billowing in from the arid street and years of cooking oil spume from the café beneath David's rented apartment blunted the telephone's once clear chime.

One ring, another and it stopped. Would it ring again? David held his breath. Life or death announced by a broken note on an ancient telephone in a tin pot dictatorship. David sniffed at the irony.

He rose from the tired teak chair, limped to the French window and looked down on the narrow street below. White haired Muhammad, unshaven as usual, plied his fennel-perfumed dough into small rounds to be cooked on his humpbacked pan into thin, soft breads he would stuff with mincemeat, tomatoes, green chilies and shredded herbs. Nearby, the middle-aged woman from the key shop, sweeping the pavement as always against the ever-present sand, glanced up and smiled to herself.

"I never asked her name." David looked away. The cobbled street was increasingly crowded with early morning shoppers, a middle-aged man rushing to get a sweet bun before work, children on their way to school, battered taxis and even now, in the early twenty-first century, a donkey cart piled high but with polythene crates rather than wooden barrels. The gaunt gnarled drover was wearing patched trousers. Oranges hanging on the drooping trees and baskets of bright yellow lemons added intimations of hope in the dun colored world of sand and dust.

Would the phone ring again?

David steadied himself against the chair and eased his hand down his back, feeling the dampness of the spring heat soaking through his cotton shirt. The discomfort in his lower spine and his right shoulder were lasting mementoes of his profession: cameras tugging around his neck, a heavy equipment bag banging on his right side, a backpack slung over the other shoulder while running towards or away from the riots, swinging batons and rifle rounds, and then crouching behind walls or fences as armored cars stalked past. The ache in his left thigh, a harsher memory of things past, penetrated more deeply. He shoved his knuckle into the center of the muscle, searching for an acupressure point to relieve the pain and growled, “Miners with lung diseases, subway drivers with the stress of another suicide, soldiers with their nightmares.” His lips tightened. “Next to them, I’ve no right to complain.”

It happened. The cracked bell argued again with the peeling hammer and slapped the wooden wall. Once only, time suspended and then silence announced his death.

David glared at the phone, stood very still for a moment and nodded, confirming what was an indisputable pronouncement. He clinched his fists and assured himself, “Stoical’s good”. He glanced across the room further into the shadows, confirming his box of memories was still present.

He thought, ‘All the conflicts and crazy violence, but still I imagined there was everything to live for.’ He closed his eyes. The haunting memory of ammonia and ether, the miasma of pain and drugs, and there it was, the end of a dream; he could no longer touch her.

With a whiff of self-pity, he whispered, “Can I say

I've really lived if, in the end, I still have not become fully conscious of who I am?" His lips relaxed enough to allow what could pass for an ironic smile.

David sank slowly onto the chair. It took his weight but creaked. "Should I have been silent?"

He was an outsider with only a few friends and a small group of aficionados around the world who still remembered him; now a nobody with little fame and less money. The regime will silence him as they have their own journalists, artists, intellectuals, trade unionists and human rights lawyers, all of whom have disappeared one by one over the past weeks since the renewed crackdown began.

He slapped his hands against his cheeks.

Amongst the disappeared were friends – good people. First they'd have been tortured to surrender names, maybe raped, then a bullet in the back of the head, a shallow grave. Ignominious, final but the next morning the sun still rose, sand still seeped into the city, surf still pounded against the broken sea walls and the people of that forlorn capital were still somnambulant within their fear and pity.

Muhammad will bake his breads and the sweet key shop woman will sweep. For the majority, a life of sorts goes on.

He shook his head like an irritated bull loosening the flies from his face and searched his memory.

In Sarajevo, after the Bosnian war, which he had reported on, David waited for Goran to arrive. The restaurant specialized in national dishes. David, sitting outside in the sunshine, ordered a begova corba - a chicken soup enriched with egg yolks and sour cream but sharpened

with lemon juice. As he watched the passers-by, his eyes were drawn up to the restored minaret rising elegantly above the hubbub of the old marketplace and to the mountains just beyond. The city nestled between their steep sides as though taking refuge in the valley. From their rocky crevices, several years earlier, Serb irregulars bombarded the city, pummeling it day by day like eternally hungry buzzards pecking the body of their defenseless victim. David still held within his nostrils the stench of burnt wood, blood and excrement. He was certain that any of the passers-by who had been present during the siege would, like him, forever recall the odor on those streets.

Goran appeared, tallish with a Van Dyke beard befitting a Balkan poet, accompanied by his pipe and his twinkling eyes. Goran and David embraced, they gossiped about all the people they knew in common, they ate Bosnian polenta covered in sour cream and a helping of boiled spring greens, they drank the local beer and then they talked about poetry.

Goran, who had been in the city for the entire siege, seemed often to be involved in an inner dialogue, occasionally emerging to engage the world. He looked up from his plate, his eyes shone. "Poets almost inevitably live their lives in opposition. It's our condition."

David squinted at his friend who was silhouetted against the sun, which was just peaking out from behind the minaret. He knew Goran hid his pain behind mirth and rarely spoke without levity. David smiled, uncertain if this was another of his friend's humorous tales.

"I'm serious." Goran laughed in his stuttering way and laid his pipe onto the edge of the thick glass ashtray.

“Poetry leads to dreams and dreams lead to the desire for change, and change leads to challenging the status quo. So you see, if you dare begin to dream you end in opposition.”

David concentrated on Goran’s formulation. “Good”, he murmured. “Good. The poet’s psyche, human aspirations and revolution in one sentence.”

The flickering upturn at the corner of Goran’s lips belied how pleased he was. In the silence that followed, Goran hid his pleasure within renewed interest for the remaining polenta.

David watched the light dance across the plate. When Goran finished the last buttery morsel and after he took another sip of the hop-flavored beer, David spoke quietly. “Do you think we invent love as a dream? That it’s not something real; just a passing fabrication all mixed up with lust, sex and loneliness; that its transience, its mutability forces us to suicide or poetry?”

Goran tapped his pipe and using his thumb, forced some Old Holborn shag into it. He studied it a long moment as if appreciating something of beauty. He looked up, directly into David’s eyes. “You will grieve for many years. Maybe you should stay here. It’s now a city of grief; we are specialists in it.”

An impatient honking from the street below brought David back to his present problem: survival.

‘Serbian, Bosnian, Arab, what does it matter? How could I have kept silent amongst these people? It was my choice; I’m a big boy, I knew it could lead me into trouble.’

The phone had rung twice and once again; that was the warning signal his friends had decided upon.

He chastised himself aloud. “This isn’t a game. I’ve two hours before they show up, two more hours at the end my life to live my destiny as I choose. And then the uniforms will rush in, beat me, throw me from my balcony onto Muhammad’s scalding pan or drag me off to a worse fate.” The sound of his voice gave him comfort and the need, because of speaking aloud to form complete sentences, concentrated his mind.

His fists jerked closed and blood palpitated in his temples. He rasped, “Okay, I’m old and sore, but somehow I can still fight. I have choices, perhaps limited but choices. I still have shreds of freewill.”

He became aware of the vegetables and lamb cooking odors rising from the café beneath his rooms.

‘People are like a stew made of divers elements but, when you cook it down, only the essence of what they are is left. Mehmet and Suleiman ... my comrades, my friends, they should be able to help.’ He frowned. ‘But in this oil-free sideshow to the region’s unending melodrama, who really cares? Anyway, it would be irresponsible to endanger them.’

His eyes narrowed and after a moment he tapped the table forcibly. ‘I can wait to be arrested or maybe murdered on the spot.’

Again he smacked the table. ‘I can try to escape but in my condition on my own, with few resources, it seems unlikely.’

He rapped the table’s edge with his knuckle one more time. ‘That leaves a quiet, anonymous, self-inflicted extinction. The rest of the world would soon forget I existed; unlike for Martin Luther King or Mozart, there will