THE SCAR *of* DAVID

A Novel

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As They Left

1947 - 1948

ARI Perlstein left to begin his medical studies shortly after attending Hasan and Dalia's wedding, but the two friends kept in touch over the next four years. When Basima died, Ari took a leave from school to mourn her passing with Hasan in Ein Hod.

The weather was clear, crisp with the loss of a matriarch on the afternoon when Hasan and Ari left the formalities of mourning that would go on for forty days. The recitation of the Quran echoed from Yehya Abulheja's home. Those hypnotic monotones of God's edicts became more and more faint as Hasan and Ari walked farther away toward the olive groves.

"It's very bad, Hasan," Ari said. "Zionists have hordes of guns. They've recruited an army from shiploads of Jews arriving every day. You don't know all of it, Hasan. They have armored cars and planes, even."

Hasan looked about him at the farmland he would one day inherit. *It looks like we'll have good crops this year.* The sound of a nye swirled over the trees and Hasan instinctively turned toward the cemetery, squinting to see if Yehya was there. No one. Just a melody, its center carved out and filled with silence, as if the nye was crying.

"Hasan, they're going to take land. They've launched a campaign across the world calling Palestine 'a land without a people.' They're going to make it a Jewish homeland."

"Father has been saying for years that this was going to happen, but it seemed so far-fetched," Hasan said. "It's real, Hasan. You know the UN is meeting in November and everyone believes they're going to partition the land. You don't know how well they're organized and you know the British disarmed the Arabs after the revolt years ago. Some of the orthodox Jews in the city have organized an anti-Zionist campaign. They say creating a physical state of Israel is sacrilege. But powerful men in the U.S. have waged a relentless campaign to persuade Harry Truman to recognize and support a Jewish state here." Ari was clearly shaken.

"How do you feel about it? I mean, making a Jewish state here," Hasan asked, squeezing an olive between his fingers to discern the harvest they might have in November. *The harvest will lessen Father's despondency.*

"I don't know, Hasan," Ari lowered his eyes, sat on a stone and toyed his fingers in the dirt. "I'm a Jew. I mean, I think it's wrong. But you don't know what it was like before." Ari's voice began to tremble. "It killed us, what happened, even though we escaped. Have you ever noticed how empty my mother's eyes are? She's dead inside. Father, too. Hasan, you don't know what it was like. And now we aren't sure if we'll be safe. Father is emphatic that what they're doing is wrong and he wants no part in it. But it isn't safe for us anymore. There's talk the British are going to pull out. Then it's inevitable. They're determined that this land will become a Jewish state. But I think if the Arabs just accept it, it'll all be fine and we can live together."

Hasan sat on the ground beside Ari. "But you just said they want a 'Jewish' state."

"Yes. But I think they'll let the Arabs stay." The words came out before Ari could stop them.

"So these immigrants will let me stay on my own land?" Hasan's voice rose.

"Hasan, that isn't what I meant. You're like a brother to me. I'd do anything for you or your family. But what happened in Europe . . ."

Ari's words faded into the awful images they'd both seen of death camps.

Hasan squeezed another olive, as if trying to squish Ari's words from the air where they hung like a betrayal. "Exactly, Ari. What Europe did. Not the Arabs. Jews have always lived here. That's why so many more are here now, isn't it? While we believed they were simply seeking refuge, poor souls just wanting to live, they've been amassing weapons to drive us from our homes." Hasan was not as angry as he sounded because he understood Ari's pain. He had read about the gas chambers, the camps, the horrors. And it was true, Mrs. Perlstein's eyes looked as if life had packed up and left them long ago. *One, two, three . . . eighteen pretty pearls.*

Anticipating the conflict that lay ahead, Hasan said, "If the Arabs get the upper hand in the Old City, go to my aunt Salma's house. You know where it is. She has a big house and you can hide there."

The Irgun, Haganah, and Stern Gang. The British called them "terrorists." The Arabs called them "Yahood," "Jews," "Zionists," "Dogs," "Sons of Whores," "Filth." The recent Jewish population called them "Freedom Fighters," "Soldiers of God," "Saviors," "Fathers," "Brothers." By whatever name, they were heavily armed, well-organized, and well-trained. They set about getting rid of the non-Jewish population—first the British, through lynchings and bombings, then the Arabs, through massacres, terror, and expulsion. Their numbers were not large, but the fear they provoked made the year 1947 quake with menace, injecting it with warnings of the coming history. They came at least four times between 1947 and 1948 to Ein Hod while Palestine was still a British Mandate.

The first attack occurred on the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah, December 12, 1947. An explosion rocked the air and Dalia ran screaming from the cemetery as someone tried to grab her.

Hasan hurried home when he heard the blast. Not finding his wife, he raced toward the cemetery and met Dalia along the way. She threw herself into his arms, crying, "The Jews are coming! The Jews are coming!"

Hasan led Dalia home, plumes of smoke rising from the adjacent village, the curious and frightened gathering in the square to see. Hasan made his way to their home and gingerly laid his wife on a sofa, wiping blood from her feet.

"What happened to you?" he asked, inspecting her bleeding leg.

"I was tending to the roses over Basima," Dalia panted. "Then I heard the blast and a hand reached from hell to grab my leg. But I just kept running and they left."

Yehya came in with a visibly anxious young Yousef in his arms. "Is everyone here? Darweesh went to check on the horses and his wife has Ismael. Where did that blood come from?"

Few things frightened little Yousef more than blood. "Mama! Mama!" he began to cry.

Dalia took her darling son into her arms and kissed his head. "It's just a small cut, my hero."

"I'm going to see what the hell happened," Yehya roared on his way out.

"Your ankle bracelet is gone!" Yousef exclaimed to his mother.

"Yes. I lost it."

"You won't jingle anymore! How will I know when you're coming?"

"I still have the other one," Dalia wiggled her leg, "see?"

Yehya stormed back in. "God curse the Jews! A gang of them firebombed a house in al-Tira and fled to a truck waiting in the olive groves above the cemetery. They must have seen Dalia at the gravesite. We're lucky they didn't get her. Allah knows what they could have done."

Yehya's anger and frustration grew, his gesturing hands speaking as loudly as his voice as he paced the room. "We need some damn weapons! Where are the Arab armies while these dogs kill one town after the

other? What the hell did we ever do to these sons of whores? What do they want from us?" He threw up his hands, settled into a chair, into the defeat of waiting, leaning back, eyes to God.

"We'll put it in the wise hands of Allah," Yehya said, and rose to leave. "Hisbiyalla wa niaamal wakeel," he whispered repeatedly to himself to ward away evil as he left.

But he did not go to help those in al-Tira. *Hisbiyalla wa niaamal wakeel.* Like the Arab countries he cursed, Yehya did not come to the aid of his fallen brethren. Secretly, he thought Ein Hod would be spared if the villagers did not "get involved." He thought the sincere offering of peace with the Jews would ensure the continuity of their lives.

"Baba, are the Jews going to bomb us too?" Yousef's question pierced his father's heart.

"Allah will protect us, Son. And I will protect you and your mother and brother, especially," Hasan reassured his son, looking at Dalia as he spoke. His eyes held an ocean of love for her. And that day, almost four years into their marriage, as Hasan held her feet in his hands and made a promise to their son, Dalia realized how deeply she loved her husband.

Less than two weeks after the incident at al-Tira, Palestinians were massacred in the nearby village of Balad-al-Shaykh. The pestilent winds of that attack blew through Ein Hod with unambiguous warning. As news of more atrocities reached Ein Hod, the villagers were gripped with dread of what was advancing their way. Anticipating more attacks, the women of Ein Hod prematurely picked the figs and grapes, drying them to make raisins and syrup, and they pickled vegetables to sustain their families in a prolonged siege by the hidden snipers.

In May of 1948, the British left and Jewish refugees who had been pouring into Palestine proclaimed themselves a Jewish state, changing the name of the land to Israel. But Ein Hod was adjacent to three villages that formed an unconquered triangle inside the new state, so

the fate of Ein Hod's people was joined with some twenty thousand Palestinians who still clung to their homes. They repulsed attacks and called for a truce, wanting only to live on their land as they always had. For they had endured many masters—Romans, Byzantines, Caliphates, Crusaders, Mamluks, Ottomans, British—and nationalism was inconsequential. Attachment to God, land, and family was the core of their being and that is what they defended and sought to keep.

Finally, a truce was reached and Ein Hod sighed with relief. "We will prepare a feast as a gesture of friendship and our intention to live side-by-side with them," Yehya decreed to the villagers on behalf of the Council of Elders. He gripped Haj Salem's hand with that hopeful and somber decision. They squeezed, an understood prayer between old friends, an implicit hope that they would continue in their lives.

Officers of the new state came in their identical tan uniforms, an impenetrable cold contradiction to the heat of July. Baking winds rustled the peppers strung up to dry, and hanging pots clanged as rifle-toting Israeli soldiers, festooned in the glory of victory, swaggered through the village. The sun clawed at everything it touched while the sumptuous smell of lamb and cumin struggled to seep through the anxiety.

Yousef, almost five years old now, clung to his mother's thobe, peeking from behind Dalia's hips at the feasting light-skinned foreigners in helmets. Among the soldiers was a man named Moshe, who believed himself to be on a mission from God. He ate, watching Dalia move with Ismael at her bosom and Yousef at her legs as she served the food. His eyes kept returning to her and his thoughts filtered all sound extraneous to the clinking of her remaining ankle bracelet.

After the feast, the soldiers departed in the chilling silence with which they ate, leaving behind a trail of contempt. In the shiver of that omen, the people of Ein Hod, individually and collectively, prayed for the rest of the day, putting their fate in the hands of Allah before laying down to sleeplessness. The next morning, July 24, Israel launched

a massive artillery and aerial bombardment of the villages. The Associated Press reported that Israeli planes and infantry had violated the Palestinian truce by the unprovoked attack, and bombs rained as Dalia ran from shelter to shelter with terror-stricken Yousef and a screaming baby Ismael.

The village was laid to ruin and Dalia lost all but two sisters that day. The father who had burned her hand lay charred in the same town square. It had taken only hours for the world to turn upside down and for Ismael to cry himself to exhaustion. Dalia kept him clutched to her chest, afraid to lay him down despite the heavy load. Like her, other survivors roamed in a wordless haze. It was a rotten quietude, devoid of fury, love, despair, or even fear. Dalia surveyed the land, burnt, lifeless. She was aware of an itch just behind her left knee, and she concentrated on it but could not will herself to reach for it.

Hasan had been in the stables when the bombing began and ran to collect his family as soon as he could. He found Dalia frozen in the awesome silence of the aftermath. Her rigid posture, unblinking eyes, and tight clutch around Ismael frightened him. "Dalia!" he called, running to her. She didn't move.

Closer now, Hasan's heart pulled him to his knees, where Yousef's little legs trembled violently and his little hands gripped tightly to Dalia's thobe.

"Baba!" Yousef cried with relief at the sight of his father. His voice in the silence made Dalia blink.

"Come here, habibi," Hasan lifted his son, rising in fear because Dalia still had not moved. Yousef's desperate grip found its way around his father's neck, and Hasan saw that his son's pants were muddied with feces and urine.

"Darweesh! Yaba!" Hasan called out to his brother and Yehya for help, but Haj Salem arrived first. "Hisbiya allah wa niamalwakeel, God curse them for this. God curse the Jews to hell," Haj Salem could only

whisper upon seeing Dalia in her state. "She's going to break her teeth clenching them that way. Hasan, give me the boy and you carry your wife."

But Yousef wouldn't let go. Wouldn't open his eyes. His arms, legs, fear and soiled pants were securely fastened to Hasan—his refuge. Just then Darweesh arrived and Hasan called to him, "Brother, carry Dalia. The east wing of the house is still intact." Darweesh lifted Dalia, Ismael still at her chest. She was blinking now, absorbing her view of a flawless blue sky—*How pretty and clear*—until Darweesh brought her inside and all she could see was the plastered ceiling of her home. *My Ismael is safe in my arms. And there is Yousef, safe in his father's. A bad dream, was it?*

Less than a day passed before Israeli soldiers reentered the village. The same men who had received the offering of food now marched through, pointing guns at the people who had fed them. Hasan, Darweesh, and other men were ordered to dig a mass grave for thirty fresh corpses. The village men were able to identify all but two of them. Hasan somberly wrote the names of his fallen friends and countrymen on the sleeve of his dishdashe as he hollowed the earth in such shock that he was unable to grieve. Al Fatiha. Dust to dust. An earth turned on its head.

Stunned—*is this a dream?*—their nerves cracking, children crying, the villagers were tractable.

"Gather the valuables. Assemble by the eastern water well. Move! This is only temporary. There are terrorists among you and they must be weeded out. Go to the well," ordered a loudspeaker voice, like a hidden God distributing destinies. The sky still infinite. The sun unforgiving. Dalia put the gold in the chest pocket of her thobe and gathered the valuables as told, Ismael on the left hip, Yousef in the right hand.

"Mama, I want Baba to carry me," Yousef pleaded.

"Go, habibi. Allah be with us all," Dalia released his little hand and the boy jumped on his father. *Allah be with us all.*

The well bubbled with faces, all creased and twisted with alarm. But for the fright, Yehya thought they could have been gathered to prepare for the harvest. *The harvest,* he thought.

"Now what?" Haj Salem wondered.

Darweesh and his pregnant wife were the last to arrive. He approached stooped, one foot after the other, grief in one hand, a heartbroken mare, Fatooma, pulled by the other. Ganoosh, Darweesh's delight and Fatooma's lifelong companion, the horse that once broke Dalia's ankle, was killed in the fighting and it took much persuasion to pull Fatooma away from the massive carcass of her mate.

Now what?

At the well, soldiers whipped their batons, herding the terrified masses down the hill. That was "now what." A cart, weighed down with the belongings of several families, wobbled, kicking up dirt. An old woman fell and someone picked her up. "Go, Go!" yelled the loudspeaker God. *This destiny for you! And this dust and this confusion.* Terror flew from people's hearts and circled above the crowd like birds. *Chirp, chirp.*

Dalia held Ismael to her chest and Hasan carried Yousef in one arm, a sack of hastily packed belongings in the other. Yehya lugged a basket of food on his back, like Atlas, and without water the villagers stumbled toward the hills beneath a parched sky.

"Stop here," said the loudspeaker God. "Bags here. Tomorrow you come collect them. Leave everything, jewelry and money. I shoot. Understand?"

Go. Stop. Understand? Return. Tomorrow. Safe. Yehya could hold onto some words. Yousef held onto his father. Dalia onto Ismael, whose scar was still red, but healing. Perhaps there was hope. So they dropped their belongings—the golden jewelry that had weighed Dalia down on her wedding day, food, clothes, and blankets. Basima's pruning shears. *Why did I bring those?* Dalia wondered.

Darweesh stripped Fatooma of the sacks saddled on her back and laid their contents next to the gold, other valuables, and the shears. "The horse! Leave the horse," a soldier ordered. Not the loudspeaker God, but his disciple, surely.

"Please!" Darweesh had no pride left.

Fatooma was worth begging for, but the begging was irritating. *Stupid dirty Arab.* "Shut up!"

"Please!"

Stupid dirty Arab. "Shut up!"

"Please."

Bang. Bang. One shot between Fatooma's eyes, on her white streak. She fell instantly dead. The other through Darweesh's chest. His pregnant wife, Basima's niece who had been betrothed to Hasan, shrieked, screaming by her bleeding husband as people gathered to carry Darweesh a distance away, where someone produced a jar of honey to prevent infection and bandaged him with strips of his own clothing. The bullet lodged in Darweesh's spine, condemning him to motionlessness; to a life plagued by unsightly bedsores; a life tormented by the burden of his wife's cheerless fate, bound to a husband who lived only from the chest up. And even from the chest up, he lived on memories of horses and wind.

Panic rose from the shots and the birds of terror were supplanted with clouds. The clouds made Yehya hope for rain. It wasn't the season yet, but his trees needed water. At times rain had been everything in Ein Hod, other times it was merely precious. Then he saw his son Darweesh and nothing had meaning. Rain be damned. Yehya dropped the basket from his back and began to cry for that strong boy of his, that impressive rider and beloved son.

Dalia still hadn't caught up. The panicked throngs had separated her from Hasan, but she could still see the top of his kaffiyeh ahead of her. He was taller than most men; she'd always liked that. *God, what is*

happening? The clouds hadn't been real. The sun stung like a scorpion. Dust was high, cactus low, and Dalia thought of water.

In an instant.

One instant, six-month-old Ismael was at her chest, in her protective motherly arms. In the next, Ismael was gone.

An instant can crush a brain and change the course of life, the course of history. It was an infinitesimal flash of time that Dalia would revisit in her mind, over and over for many years, searching for some clue, some hint of what might have happened to her son. Even after she became lost in an eclipsed reality, she would search the fleeing crowd in her mind for Ismael.

"Ibni! Ibni!" My son, my son, Dalia screamed, her eyes bulging in search of her son. Dust at her face, cactus at her feet. "Ibni! Ibni!" She scanned the ground, looked up, and Hasan's tall figure was not there. "Ibni! Ibni!" Some people tried to help her but gunshots tolled and Dalia was shoved along. *Is this a dream?* Nothing seemed real because it was unbelievable. She looked at her arms again to be sure. *Maybe he's crawled into my thobe.* She felt her chest. *No Ismael.* Her son was gone.

She stopped and so did time. Dalia screamed like she hadn't when her father burned her hand. A loud, penetrating, consuming, abysmal, unworldly scream from a mother's deepest agony. From the most profound desire to reverse time, just a few minutes. If there is a God, he heard Dalia's wail. Hasan ran to her, Yousef squeezed his father tighter, afraid to speak, and the three of them made it to safety on Hasan's strength and will.

The villagers sat on the ground in the valley. The land was as beautiful and peaceful as it had always been. Trees and sky and hills and stone were unchanged and the villagers were dazed and quiet, except Dalia. She was mad with anguish, questioning people and uncovering other women's babies in hope of revealing a boy with a scar down his right cheek, around his eye. She searched with frenzied foreboding,

even though Yehya tried to reassure her that "surely" someone had picked up the child and "surely" it was only a matter of time before they would be reunited. *Surely* Yehya knew, *you can't hold onto words.*

Dalia spent the last of her energy on tears, replaying that instant, over and over and over. Little Yousef, not comprehending the sudden hell that befell the whole village, agreed to let go of his father and sat in his Jiddo Yehya's arms, both of them dazed and teary.

Hasan shuffled restlessly between his wounded brother Darweesh, his inconsolable wife, his terrified son, and his bewildered father, until finally he succumbed to exhaustion and slept on the ground among merciless mosquitoes, a stone to rest his head.

"Jiddo, can we go home now?" Yousef asked his grandfather.

Yehya could not lie, nor could he tell the truth. He kissed his grandson, pulled him closer, tighter, to his chest and said, "Get some rest, ya ibni, get some rest now, ya habibi." *My son, my beloved.*

They tried to return the next day, but the guns behind them made their march a one-way trek. Up and down unforgiving hills, under the sun's absolute reign. The weak fell and died. Women miscarried and the dehydrated bodies of babies went limp in their mother's arms. Jenin was as far as they could go, and they rested wherever there was space among the flood of refugees converging from other villages. Residents of those towns helped them as much as they could, giving away their food, blankets and water, and fitting as many as possible into their homes in that time of crisis. Soon Jordan, Iraq, and Syria gave out a few tents, and a refugee camp sprang up in Jenin, not all that far from the homes to which the villagers of Ein Hod could never return.

So it was that eight centuries after its founding by a general of Saladin's army in 1189 A.D., Ein Hod was cleared of its Palestinian children. Yehya tried to calculate the number of generations who had lived and died in that village and he came up with forty. It was a task made simple by the way Arabs name their children to tell the story of

their genealogy, conferring five or six names from the child's direct lineage, in proper order.

Thus Yehya tallied forty generations of living, now stolen. Forty generations worth of childbirth and funerals, weddings and dance, prayer and scraped knees. Forty generations of sin and charity, of cooking, toiling and idling, of friendships and animosities and pacts, of rain and lovemaking. Forty generations with their imprinted memories, secrets, and scandals. All carried away by the notion of entitlement of another people, who would settle in the vacancy and proclaim it all—all that was left in the way of architecture, orchards, wells, flowers, and charm—all of it as the heritage of Jewish foreigners arriving from Europe, Russia, the United States, and other corners of the globe.

In the unbearable sorrow of a history buried alive, the year 1948 in Palestine fell from the calendar into exile, ceasing to reckon with the marching count of days, months, and years; instead becoming an infinite mist of one moment in history, waiting for justice to redeem and let 1948 rejoin the registers of years and nations.

The twelve months of that year rearranged themselves and swirled aimlessly in the last tick of the clock, its heartbreak becoming a dominion onto itself. The old folks of Ein Hod would die refugees in the camp, bequeathing to their heirs the large iron keys to their ancestral homes, the crumbling land registers issued by the Ottomans, the deeds from the British Mandate, their memories and love of the land, and the dauntless will not to leave the spirit of forty generations trapped beneath the subversion of thieves.

5

"Ibni! Ibni!"

1948

THE hot winds of the Negev usually blew northward in Septembe before fall, as if the desert's attempt to prolong the heat. But late i July of 1948 those winds swept toward Jerusalem, an early rendezvou with summer in the northern hills west of the Jordan River. Septembe was only weeks away, and it always arrived proudly with dry souther winds and baskets of rain.

Rain, just a hint of its coming, was a reminder of hope. *And th feast of the truce,* thought the villagers, *will mark a peaceful beginning.*

As soldiers of this Israel ate, the one named Moshe watched a Arab woman. At her legs, a small boy clung to her caftan. In one arm an infant nestled to her chest and with her free hand, the Arab woma served lamb to Moshe and his comrades. In his soldier's tan uniform he thought how unfair it was that this Arab peasant should have th gift of children while his poor Jolanta, who had suffered the sordid his tory of genocide, could not bear a child. It made him weep inside.

Moshe wanted Jolanta to be happy. Jolanta wanted a child. Bu Jolanta's body had been ravaged by Nazis who had forced her to spen her late teens serving the physical appetites of SS minions. The horro saved her life, but left her barren. Having lost every member of he family in death camps, Jolanta sailed alone to Palestine at the end c World War II. She knew nothing of Palestine or Palestinians, followin