

Snapshots

by: Michal Govrin

Book Description

In a brief telephone call from Paris, Alain informs Tirtza that his wife, Ilana Tzuriel, her childhood friend from Haifa, has died in a car accident. Between the lines, for the first time, Tirtza admits her secret love for Ilana. Alain, a French Jew, asks Tirtza to decipher a collection of notes, written in Hebrew, which were found in Ilana's hand bag: snapshots of an intimate conversation she held with her father in the year after his death. Confessions that the father, a Zionist pioneer, and the daughter, a beautiful, leftist architect, who had left Israel some years before, never dared to voice openly. Words of betrayal and loyalty - to the father, to Israel, to the Jewish story - and of a passionate, turbulent, wandering life of love and creativity among the capitals of the world.

Ilana develops a "feminine architecture", which gains her an international reputation, and is also true to the notion of "open femininity" which she lives out in her permissive love life. Surprisingly enough, she marries Alain Greenberg, a historian and Nazi-hunter, who survived the holocaust as a child. Their marriage is saturated with passion and with an ever-present absence. Even the births of their two sons, David and Yonatan, do not anchor their wandering life. Her father's illness and approaching death, crack the cosmopolitan outer layer that coats Ilana's life. She returns to Israel, for the first time, to design and build a "Utopian Monument" to peace, in Jerusalem, borrowing the radical Jewish space concepts of "Shmita"(fallow year, Sabbatical) and "Succah" (a hut). At his deathbed, she tells her father of her plan and receives his blessing. The shock of his absence drives her to find refuge in a passionate love affair with Said Ashabi, the Palestinian director of the Al-Quds Theatre Company, which is booked to perform at the monument. Their love story takes place in Jerusalem, Amsterdam, Paris and New-York, cities among which Said, the elusive exile, wanders as well. Ilana holds on to her desperate love and to the dream of peace, until the tyrant hand of history intervenes as Iraq invades Kuwait.

History, in fact, has always dictated the fates of the heroes. The father, an idealistic Zionist, came to Israel at the beginning of the 20th century, fleeing

pogroms in the Ukraine; Alain, the child survivor, has always lived under the shadow of the holocaust; David, the beloved cousin, who died during the Yom Kippur War, was named after his grandfather, killed in the 1929 Arab riots; and Said's Palestinian identity has been formed between the Six Day War, the bombing of Beirut and the first Intifada, in the thick of which the novel begins. Against the torrents of history, Ilana insists on continuing preparations for the peace monument. She arrives in Jerusalem with her two small sons, on the eve of the Gulf War, estranged from Alain, who is haunted by his fear of the destruction of the State of Israel, and from Said who avoids any contact with her after the fighting begins. The events, apparently reported live by CNN, seem equally unreal.

With the outbreak of the Gulf War, Ilana finds herself surrounded by a mixed multitude of neighbors that turns out to be a microcosm of Israeli society. The texture of life at the housing project and the solidarity – formed among Alegra, the Moroccan caretaker who holds every one together, Mr. Shleiker, the cranky German Jew who becomes a private tutor for the six year-old David, and the three generations of Russian immigrants who arrive under the shadow of the scuds – finally provide Ilana and her sons with a sense of home. Despite the suspension of the construction project, she continues to map Jerusalem's landscapes, accompanied by her father's voice. As the threat increases she adds yet more utopian bricks to her plan: water will wash the stones of the holy places of Jerusalem – the city-woman, the conflict-city, the center of a ferocious passion for possession.

Sitting in the sealed room, with her two sons, through nights of paralyzing fear, Ilana uncovers new depths of motherhood and compassion. When Said returns to Jerusalem after the war, she meets with him briefly, while her fragile relationship with Alain awaits her in Paris. When she finds out that she is pregnant – not knowing yet who the father is – she accepts the growing life with a newfound love. She embarks upon a night drive to Munich, to an architecture conference, where she plans to present her innovations, listening to Don Giovanni, "her music", on the car's radio-tape. Parked on the side of the road, she continues her intimate conversation with her father, in a final snapshot before her death.