

# The Mosaic of Ashkelon

At Ashkelon the sea is silvery green. At dawn, its phosphorescent veins shimmer with the mysterious light emanating from its depths, and the stone columns rising up from the shore resemble arms stretched out to distant oceans.

I have taken off my shoes and am walking along barefoot. It is good to feel the coolness of the early morning seashore. From the north comes a mild breeze fragrant with the scent of blossoming orchards. Probably from Sharon. Where are the sails of the little fishing boats? They would now be filled by this little dawn breeze, and their whiteness would harmonize so beautifully with the clarity of God's bright dawn.

About three miles south of Ashkelon the Gaza Strip begins. The fishermen are scared to set out at night for the southern shores because an unexpected wind can carry their boats on toward the Arab lookout posts. The latter are always lying in wait for winds blowing southward.

I was tired of the marble columns, the battered blocks of stone, the ancient wells with their thousand-year-old, twisted stems of olives and sycamores, and the statues whose faces are worn away to a blank smoothness. For hours I gazed at the folds of their stone garments, at their breasts visible beneath petrified drapery, and at the ornamented capitals of the columns. I dug around in the clayey soil full of pottery fragments, and it seemed to me as if those shards had been brought

from the potter's workshop only the day before and scattered in the fields to make a barrier against the spring and winter floods; they were used to line trenches that were then filled with water to irrigate the gardens.

Now I am alone on the seashore at dawn. The world has turned its face from me. The distance is veiled in mist. Danger lies in wait to the south, and from the north there is no longer the scent of blossoming orchards. The pitiless sun rises higher in the sky, and the mysterious light from the sea's depths is no more than a fantasy of mine. The only truth is the fear that lurks here. Soon something sharp and dark will flash on the horizon. Could it be a spy ship from the other side?

I am standing on the shore, leaning my back against the rocks. Above me rise the towering columns, some of which are of marble and some made of a dark brown metal, perhaps bronze. Once upon a time they protected the harbor. How many generations have passed since then? The sea level sank until its sands were revealed in front of the rocks. I am now standing where, twenty generations ago, there was an abyss. We are living in an abyss, I said to myself, and I began to look around that rocky shore for a path so that I might clamber up to where the ancient gardens of Ashkelon once stood.

He suddenly appeared before me like a shadow and looked at me with a calm gaze, his eyes fixed and impassive. His face was dark, like old silver that had just been hammered out anew. His hair fell in large tangled black curls. His open shirt was damp and of a dull green color, as if woven from filaments of seaweed. Even the disheveled hair on his chest resembled the green moss on stones under the sea.

"Sir, you haven't seen a sailing boat with phosphorescent green sails?" he asked me.

"No."

He put both hands to his forehead, shading his eyes, and stared out at the distant sea. His fingers were long, with gleaming white joints. I was surprised by the grace of his movements.

"It looks as if the boat won't come today either," he said, as if talking to himself. "Ha ha, you mustn't lose patience, it will come.

I've already been waiting a thousand years. . . . What's a thousand years, after all? Look at the stones; they remember the days of Creation . . ."

He laughed, and his laughter cheered me up. I admired his agility as he jumped from one jagged rock to another, and I was amazed by his strange beauty. It was good to meet this young fisherman in the early morning, and to hear his laughter.

I didn't go to the ancient gardens of Ashkelon. They are desolate, and for two thousand years the stone troughs have been dying for the cool streams of well water. The basins have been covered by a salty deposit from the sea. The wild grasses with large, withered, starlike flowers are covered by dead snails with mother-of-pearl shells, which look like the eyes of desert birds that have died of thirst. What attracted me instead was the silence of the sea's mirror.

I will cast my line again; perhaps this time I will manage to catch a fish. I made a loop where the sharp hook was fastened to the lead weight. Then I found a round stone the size of three fingers and attached it to the line, tightening the loop round it, and hurled it far out into the sea. The surface of the water was broken by silver rings that spread out all the way to my feet. I moved forward into the sea. The line was suddenly pulled so strongly that it cut into my fingers. At the same moment a dark sailing boat appeared to the south.

From the shore came a shout. It was the same strange young man. He sprang swiftly down the winding, rocky paths, and some moments later I saw his fragmented shadow on the churning waters near the shore.

"Do you see the sail?"

Not waiting for my answer, he called out, clapping his hands.

"They're coming! Soon they'll reach the silver-green strip of water, and then it will happen."

My line had slackened, and I left the water and sat down on the sand. These fish are teasing me today. Every time I throw my line, I feel a large fish pulling the hook, but as soon as I try to wind the line around my arm, the fish disappears.

"What will happen?" I asked.

"Ha ha, I see that you are a stranger here. This is your first time in old Ashkelon. You don't even know the fish from our waters. Just now there was one instant when it was yours—at that moment you could have pulled in the line, and now there'd be a gleaming silver fish weighing perhaps five kilos twitching on the beach. But you let that moment pass. You couldn't distinguish it from all the other moments."

Suddenly he stopped speaking and his lips trembled. The disheveled, mossy hair on his chest seemed to fade. The boy sat down on the damp sand, rested his hands on his knees, and stared out in front of him.

In the evening, on the little streets of old Ashkelon, he accosted me.

"The boat will come tomorrow. Before sunrise. Will you be on the shore?"

"No."

"If you are, you will catch a rare fish. Sir, if you buy me a glass of arrack, I'll tell you a secret."

He whispered the words in my ear. The shashlik seller, her large, red hands with their scarlet-painted fingernails bloodied by the pieces of raw meat, winked at me. She put her finger to her temple and twisted it, then burst out laughing.

We went into a bar with a ceiling so low that our heads almost touched it. Several men stood bent over a low table. I could only see the spread fingers of their hands and the little yellow dominoes they had thrown down. One tall individual peered at me with a mocking expression and nudged the others with his drooping shoulder. They turned around to look at me for an instant and smiled through the smoky fog enveloping them.

"Hey, Salim, your little sailing boat hasn't arrived yet?" asked the man with the drooping shoulder.

"Your name is Salim?" I asked. "Do you want some arrack? Okay, I'll order some. Hey, Khavadzha!" I called out like a regular. "Two arracks!"

Salim sniffed his glass and then drank.

"You've heard of the cave that was discovered last year?" he asked.

"I had already been going there for years and admiring the mosaic by the light of a tallow candle. Once I remained for the whole winter.

"It started like this. She arrived by boat on the same day the Arabs ran away from there, when it became a Jewish state. I didn't flee with the Arabs. Why not? Because my mother was a Jewish woman from Safed. It was an unhappy love affair with an Arab that brought her here. Salim is my name. I stayed here alone in old Ashkelon when the men of the Haganah arrived. I said to them, 'My mother was Jewish, so I am Jewish.' They gave me bread and wine. At night they left the town.

"We'll be back in the morning,' the leader told me. I was the only living soul there; everyone else had fled to Beersheba. During the night I went down to the sea. When I passed the place where the columns and the ancient sculptures stand, their actual faces emerged out of the stone. I heard a voice coming from one of the columns: 'We have revealed our faces to you because you are the sole heir of our fame and greatness. For thousands of years we have turned our faces away from the sinful people, but now we can reveal them. Look at us!'

"I fell to my knees. The pillars were flooded with mysterious moonlight. And then I heard footsteps. By the shore lay a sailing boat that looked luminous green. Then she came toward me and said, 'Salim, it's good that you have come to meet me. We have to get there in time, before the moonlight fades.' That's what she said to me. For an hour I walked beside her in silence. There was a boulder standing where a tamarisk tree grew. She bent down and touched the stone, and it rolled away all by itself. Then I saw a cave. A bright light streamed from it. 'Come!' I wanted to close my eyes but couldn't. The mosaic was shining. I saw the planets rotating, and around them moved the virgin, naked as the day she was born. Her body was be-decked with rings and pearls, and her long tresses cascaded down, gleaming with a golden light."

Salim fell silent. He picked up the glass of arrack and emptied it in one gulp. His fingers touched my arm, and I felt the heat emanating from them. He seemed now to be totally distant, seeing only the

virgin with her naked body. His face was damp, droplets of sweat had broken out on his brow, and his hot breath made his lips glisten.

"Salim, what part of your story have you gotten to now?" asked the landlord. "Are you at the bit where she leads you to the tamarisk and the stone rolls away from the cave mouth all by itself? Or have you got as far as the cascading tresses? Ha ha ha!"

A few of the customers burst into thunderous roars of laughter.

Salim jumped up, flecks of foam gathering on his lips. He beat his chest with clenched fists.

"I will never darken your door again!" he said to the innkeeper. "I'm not going to bring in any more strangers to buy me arrack. You are always making fun of me. You're desecrating the truth. Just tell me: Who was it that led the archaeologist into the cave a year ago? Tell me! Jews! Admit the injustice you're doing to me! By all that's holy, answer me. You must answer me!"

With one shove he overturned the table. The dominoes all scattered on the floor and lay there with their black dots facing upward. Someone said to me, "It's true that Salim drew attention to the cave. There the mosaic was found, as well as some ancient wine jars and a beaker made of gopher wood."

"Tell me," Salim said, "how did I know about the cave? How? Did an angel from heaven reveal the secret to me? No! It was *her*. At dawn I accompanied her back to the boat. I watched her float away from me. 'Guard the cave. I shall come back the same way, but remember, Salim, you must stay as honest and pure as you are. Only do good deeds, and then I shall appear again. It will happen soon. But you must be there to welcome me. Wait for me by the old harbor.'

"You are unbelievers, sinners," he continued. "All the ancient stone faces revealed themselves to *me*, whereas they have concealed themselves from you, deep inside their stony intestines. . . . Only lying and baseness have domination over you, and you are preventing her return. You . . ."

Salim's fists unclenched. He put his hands together as if he were praying and quietly left the bar. He didn't even look at me. I sat for a long time over my glass of arrack, listening to the dominoes falling

on the low table and to the hoarse conversations in Hebrew and in Arabic.

Around midnight a girl appeared in the open doorway of the bar and looked me up and down. "Taltila, here's someone who's waiting to hear the end of Salim's story!" called out the landlord.

She came up to me, touched the little tiled table with one finger, and turned on her high heels in order, it seemed, that I should see her ample thighs and legs.

"Sir, you want to hear the end of Salim's story? Come with me and I'll tell it to you. Come, it's not far from here . . ."

The sea was restless. On the rocky shore I can see Salim's silhouette. Far away, on the horizon, there is some kind of dark shape. Could it be the little sailing boat?

## With My Own Hands

One evening ten years ago, a man stopped me on the beach in Tel Aviv and said, "Sir, I know who you are . . . forgive me for addressing you. Night is approaching fast—the sunset passes so quickly here, before one looks around it's already dark. But I must speak to you, for today something happened to me."

"Who are you?" I asked. "What's happened to you?"

"Will you hear me out? Have you got enough patience?"

"Yes," I said, imagining that I was in for a convoluted story with a long-winded introduction, lots of unimportant details, and confusing digressions. Before me stood an elderly man with graying hair, wearing an open-necked white shirt. His forehead was furrowed and his eyebrows lowered.

"I can speak on one condition: you are not to write about this now. On no account must you write it down, nor even relate it to anyone. Give me your hand and promise me this."

I had the urge to walk away, but somehow I couldn't. The sharp tone of his words, his demanding gaze, and his outstretched hand held me in their sway.

"Ten years from now you may write and speak about our conversation, but not until then. Not even a day sooner. And even then, you must not mention any names, nor the place where the event occurred."

I held out my hand and felt the stranger's trembling fingers.