

Roe Rosen

Ziona™

An excerpt from the novel

Although it was late in the history archives on the fourth floor of the public library, a lone, shabby young woman was sorting through yellowing documents: Yona Zimmer was uploading forgotten records from the time of the British Mandate into the library's supercomputer. A faint smile lit Zimmer's face as she read the minutes of the meeting at which, after gruelling discussions, the local community leaders and government commissioners agreed on a name for the world's largest Jewish city, accepted by both parties because it had meaning both in the holy tongue and in that of the Empire: Tel Horef, which could, with a little good will, be mistranslated into English as *Winter's Tell*, after Shakespeare's comedy.

The librarian's fingers raced over the keyboard at superhuman speed. Yona Zimmer typed so rapidly that she created a light wind, and the cigarette ash from the overflowing ashtray whirled in the air like a vortex of gray-white fallout just above the rare documents. A faint plume of steam rose from her coffee cup and collected in droplets on the thick lenses of her glasses.

But Yona suddenly frowned with a mixture of tension and

revulsion. She felt the negative presence of the obese man she knew so well!

The library director, Simkha Sweet-Matok was approaching!

She could hear the thump of his footsteps even when he got out of a distant elevator on the fourth floor, but she sensed the stench, his foul body odor, as soon as he locked his office door in the third basement, seven floors below. It was the smell of cheap, tear-inducing apple vinegar, mixed with the repellent bitterness of mildewed clods of earth, and the hidden, although to her sensitive nostrils almost tangible, smell of a carcass.

How does a living body acquire the stench of death? Is it the rancid fruit of bad nutrition? Spiritual decay that corrupts the body? The stealthy incubation of disease? And what is the meaning of the revulsion that a smell like this arouses? There is a latent seed of death in every human being, but Yona believed that some people carry death like an entity in their belly; a living, pulsing death that applies pressure to their bladder and makes their body movements cumbersome. They carry death as though pregnant with it, so the smell is repellent. Yet even before his somatic smells and carrion stench enveloped Yona, she sensed the blast of thick, sweet perfume that Simkha Sweet-Matok liked to spray on himself—a smell that announced the entrance of a guest like a thunderous farting of trumpets. Now he was very close, behind her.

She had no doubt at all that Simkha Sweet-Matok had come to the rare document archive to lust after her again. What would he say this time? Would he whisper in his smoky baritone, There are some *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, Ms. Zimmer, that can only be learnt with the lights out, what-do-you-say? Would he try his belligerent-threat ploy, Sometimes business and pleasure can go together, Yona, and on the other hand, for those who aren't careful, unemployment and suffering also go hand in hand, if-you-get-my-drift. Or would he try the charm of the humiliating insinuation, So this is where you try to escape loneliness in the middle of the night, Yona? And perhaps he would go even further and recite Ecclesiastes in a boastful, good-humored tone, "And further by these, my son, be admonished;

of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh."

"So *this* is where you try to escape loneliness in the middle of the night, Ms. Yona Zimmer?"

"I still have some work to do, Mister, and I think you have too."

"You can call me Simkha, Ms. Yona Zimmer. You've been working here for almost two years now! Although I'm the director I'd also like to be...accessible on a personal level. Apart from that, if I may be candid, I haven't come up to this depressing cubbyhole on business."

Yona got up from her chair to respond to his last sentence with a smile, but froze when she felt Simkha Sweet-Matok's fingers stroking the right cheek of her buttocks and squeezing it.

Be that as it may, her surprise was less than his.

His fingers recoiled slightly and his hand hung suspended in the air close to her backside.

"God in heaven...your ass is as hard as board-wood, Yona... King of Kings...I must say that you've greatly surprised me...I didn't expect such...how can I put it...physical fitness."

Mr. Sweet-Matok's confusion was understandable. The interpretation of body language and facial features was a kind of personal hobby for him, he was well-versed in eugenics and confident that, although an amateur, his interpretive abilities were on a par with the leading scientists of the early 20th century. But nothing in Yona's facial and physical map—neither the contour of her skull, nor the bridge of her nose, her posture or the curve of the gap between the librarian's legs—could have prepared him for the superhuman muscularity of her rump.

Yona Zimmer was thin, of average height, slightly bent, as if to see better through the somewhat diffuse bottle lenses of her glasses. Her eyes always had a benevolent, bovine expression and her fleshy lips had a slight, almost invisible tremor which Simkha Sweet-Matok interpreted as the nervousness of fright. Yona Zimmer's mother, so Simkha had read in her personal file (which has been next to his bed

for the last two weeks) was of Yemenite origin, and this unimpressive young woman had inherited her olive complexion. Simkha didn't know where the rather hooked line of her nose came from—but it was his understanding (not only of physiognomy but also of the social sciences)—that her dark skin and aquiline nose put Yona Zimmer unmistakably into the large, perhaps even the largest group of normal but substandard women: reasonable, ordinary women by any measure whose status is only slightly higher than those with a minor limb deformity or a hump that can almost be concealed. If their fate brought them to the city, these women were doomed to live on a pittance and grow old, wretched and alone (according to Sweet-Matok). Looking at it from another angle, a woman with a hooked nose and the wrong skin color would be more inclined to consider any invasive dick as not just sexual intercourse but an unexpected compliment, a kind of surprise party for the genitalia inspiring gratitude and euphoria, and even igniting a glimmer of hope in her heart for a life of conjugality.

Simkha Sweet-Matok had borrowed two dozen files of female employees from the cabinet of the library's human resources director. Meticulously arranged on the nightstand to the right of his bed were the files of those women with whom he had already had his way. Yona's was among the files on the nightstand to the left. It did not contain any information of the truly desirable type (a shameful secret whose disclosure would arouse panic, a childhood sexual trauma that could be put to creative use, a long-standing debt with high interest). On the other hand, Zimmer's file contained nothing that would prevent him, if she didn't give herself to him, from throwing her out without severance pay. There was just one odd and very warm letter of recommendation from an extremely powerful man in the American administration. It was this letter that had prevented Sweet-Matok's hand from an earlier feel of the shy librarian's ass.

At the very moment that Yona turned to react to her backside being grabbed, her eye caught the flash of the distress signal on the miniature screen embedded in the upper-right corner of her glasses frame. Thousands of video cameras, five satellites and a supercomputer channeled a constant flow of images and information to the

superheroine's control center, and when she was summoned to action, Zion's electronic icon flashed very close to her retina: a Star of David with a Z in its center, in light blue, yellow and purple.

Flashing beneath the striking logo, in bluish letters, was the address to which she must rush—24th Lane (previously Yosef Ribba Lane). All at once, her rage at Mr. Sweet-Matok was replaced by a purposeful calm. She fabricated a hysterical outburst of tears—an uncontrollable reaction to his touch on her posterior—and with her smoking cigarette still between her lips, she broke into a run (meticulously seasoned with just the right amount of clumsiness) towards the corridor and then the stairs.

On the seventh floor, which she reached in seconds, she went into a restroom to change into her costume.

Translated from the Hebrew by Anthony Berris