

Chapter 1

At about twelve forty five, when the heat reached its highest peak, the DC9's landing gear touched the runway of Mouaka's International Airport single and narrow landing strip; at the capital of the Coast of Hope one of those poverty struck West African countries, which gained their independence during the last decade.

Reouven Shatz released the safety belt with a sigh of relief, and raised his handbag up to his lap ready to leave the plane, he was yearning for it in fact.

The flight that took off a morning earlier from Paris, turned into a disgusting nightmare.

The plane was frightfully crowded, there were too many by-landings "en route"; and the service as a direct outcome of these same reasons, was simply awful.

In one of those short by-landings they were left in the plane, restricted to their seats, while the plane's engines were switched off; and the air-condition inside the passengers cabin stopped working, The growing heat and the high rate of humidity on top of it, which Shatz has encountered for the first time in his life were almost intolerable. His cloths were soaked with his own perspiration, during those forty five minutes of the refueling break,

Thus whenever he could escape the heat during those short by-landings, in the shaded and air-conditioned transit halls; in those small air terminals on their way, he rushed out as fast as he could, to reach these cool havens.

The plane was heading slowly on the deserted and narrow lane towards the terminal in a roaring solitude, and reaching it at last the plane stopped in front of the rather small terminal.

A mixed group of colored and white passengers were standing along the aisle, ignoring the captain's order to keep on seating in their seats ready to get off with obvious impatience, blocking the only possible cabin's passage. The two air-hostesses popped out of the pilot's cockpit, pushing their way to the plane's rear through the small crowd of the queuing passengers; smiling happily for their first time on that day, and ignoring the slight inconveniences they had to experience. While they were trying to reach the plane's rear door. Shatz preferred to sit on, and enjoy the air condition system, which kept operating; and watch through the plane's small oval window the landscape outside with curiosity.

On the broad cement square, facing the terminal, a shabby one-story building, the plane turned its nose and stopped still. The combination of a trap door with a joined staircase just under its tail, opened up with much noise, in a series of sharp clicks and thuds and cable screeches.

A few seconds passed and the first passengers that were eager to get off thanked lavishly the air-hostesses; happy smiles and compliments were exchanged as they were leaving the plane.

Shatz got quickly to his feet, picked up his handbag and caught up swiftly with the few passengers that were on their way out. He crossed the short distance to the door, and rushed out after them; and parted with two air-hostesses with a hardly audible thank you, and a farewell smile.

While descending the plane's staircase he swepted with a quick glance the broad square from side to side with expectancy, looking for a small group or a single person that expects his arrival.

A huge crowd has gathered there, between the plane and the terminal building. They were divided into small groups and stood facing the plane, with their eyes fixed on its open door; a colorful human mass murmuring, ejaculating excitedly, waving their arms, smiling, calling out names, and welcoming their beloved relatives, their dear friends, as they just appeared at the plane's rear doorway.

It's quite a sight, Shatz thought stepping on the tarmac, and scrutinizing the nearest faces with interest.

A trio of a woman and two men were standing nearby, watching the descending passengers with eager eyes. As they spotted Shatz almost at once, they stared at him as if they were expecting him to react instantly, and give them some sign.

He didn't have the slightest doubt, who they were expecting. The one in their midst was wearing a familiar light IDF uniform with major rank fig leaves on his shoulders, the tall man and good looking young woman were civilians.

Shatz ignored the tumultuous crowd, the hugs and kisses, the quick prattle in French all around him, and went towards his compatriots with a confident smile, as if they were his close friends.

'Shalom!' He greeted them in Hebrew as he was getting closer to them, glad to note their passive expressionless features turning into a warm welcoming smile.

As it usually happens on such circumstances, when citizens of the same country meet one another abroad for the very first time, although they are outright strangers the personal barriers collapse rather quickly.

'Everon, Avraham Everon', the one in their midst introduced himself; the one who is wearing the uniform with the dark tiny metal fig leaf upon each of his shoulders.

He is a bit shorter than Shatz, but of an average height; thin but well built, and he does not look bad at all for his age, some forty years more or less. While shaking hands with Shatz, he introduced to Shatz his two compatriots:

'These are Moshe Priel and his pretty treasure of a wife, Hilla. You must have had a rather nice flight I suppose?' Everon kept on talking while Shatz was shaking hands with the Priels', and admiring Hilla's lovely features; while he kept muttering: 'Reouven, glad to meet you,' when his small reception party broke out in a sudden fit of laughter sweeping him along as well. 'Oh yes, it was quite an experience.' Shatz admitted laughing still, remembering the flight's hardships.

'...And the tricks they had to use, to serve the passengers their meals right over their heads. God, that flight was a real nightmare, how crowded we were! That plane had originally two seats on each side of the aisle, that's what I believe but an additional seat must have been added, to each row on the left hand side.' Thus in a torrent of words before any of his three compatriots could interrupt him, Shatz released his obstructed frustration and excitement, which was caused by the long trip and that long desired landing at its end.

'Well, it's a pretty busy line and the extent of their activities is tremendous.' Everon said, summing the matter up.

'All right what's your luggage like? How many suitcases have you brought along with you?'

'Well Just one suitcase', Shatz answered surprised. 'Can it be easily identified; how does it look?'

'Why sure, it's a brown leather suitcase, and there is of course an identifying card with my name attached to its handle, just as it should be.' Shatz assured him.

'Moshe, take that matter into your hands, and don't you waste any needless time on it.' Everon turned to Priel, with a note of warning.

'Your pretty wife and I will do our best, to ease Reouven out of the rest of the bureaucracy procedures.'

Chapter 2

The tall and heavy set Priel, turned round without any objection or comment, and was on his way to perform his task; he vanished behind the scattered groups, which lingered on, next to the plane. Most of the small welcoming groups around them with their dear ones, were already on their way to the terminal.

'Shall we?' Everon asked them in what was in fact a brisk impatient order, and the three of them made their way, towards the terminal's wide entrance.

The warm and friendly atmosphere seemed to have evaporated miraculously in the day's heat.

It must be the heat and that terrible humidity, which causes such sharp changes in human behavior.

Shatz thought as he walked between the two that made his welcome party.

'What's new back home?' Hilla Priel asked him with an eager smile on her pretty face.

'Cut it off will you!' Everon scolded her rudely before Shatz could answer.

'You'll hear enough tonight and in the coming days, so let get his formal procedure done with; come on we have got to book him in his hotel yet, and he is allowed to some rest after all, he must have had enough for one day. So don't you bother us now with futile gossip.' Everon kept on scolding her, as he led the two of them inside the terminal building.

The shabby old building, a relic in fact of the old colonial days that served nowadays as the country's sole terminal, was no doubt some kind of a warehouse at the beginning of the century. Some traces of color still adhered to its walls. It had a rather tall ceiling, way up above one's head and an unfinished wall of bare bricks divided the small passengers' hall from the rest of its offices. But it seemed as if it had been abandoned in mid-work, that's how it looked like; for it did not reach the ceiling as it was supposed to.

The loud hissing noises so typical to wireless sets and the loud parley, between the terminal and the plane cockpit outside, filled the small and crowded hall; assailing Shatz's ears, deafening him almost, as he was crossing the terminal's threshold in Everon's wake.

The continuous uproar combined of human humdrum and mechanical noises made Shatz grimace. Beads of perspiration appeared on his forehead and his upper lip. He was tired already, and wished it will be all over and done with, He loosened his tie a bit with his free hand, and wiped his brow, and then turned to have another look at Hilla's pretty face, which was so close to his own.

'Is this the usual welcome one gets here?' He asked her trying to cheer her up, and get over his growing excitement being so close to this pretty young woman. But she shrugged her shoulders with indifference, and sulked on beside him; but right then with a nod of her head, moving it twice upward, and in a certain direction she turned his attention to Everon.

The latter was leaning on the immigration counter, next to a local clerk. As soon as he caught Shatz eye he summoned him, waving his arm back and forth. 'Excusez, excusez moi,' Shatz muttered in hesitant French, which was acquired in a short two months course and taken on the verge of his departure; as he was pushing his way through the thronging groups of oncoming passengers, their relatives and friends that crowded now the small passengers' hall.

'Come on, hurry up,' Everon called up in Hebrew.

'He wants to see your face.'

Those who were about to leave and those who just arrived along with Shatz; accompanied by their relatives, friends and acquaintances, were queuing in the same queue, before the same check-in/check-out counter waiting patiently for their turn. Most of them were busy talking with one another, or preferred out of experience to ignore unpleasant harmless incidents, such as the one Everon was causing right now. Some though were annoyed, and a few others watched the scene created by Eevron with obvious anger and frustration.

Everon in what seemed a rather good mood was jesting with the local clerk in eloquent French, mixed with bits of the local jargon, which Shatz couldn't understand. About half a dozen policemen leaned lazily on the wall, behind the counter joined with the clerk and Everon in a hearty laughter. The work was not hindered or slowed down in that certain case, Shatz's passport was stamped without delay and was handed back to him. And Shatz parted from the clerk with a warm handshake and polite greetings thanks to Everon of course, and having passed that stage he and his escort of two were ready to move on.

'That's the gate through which honest and just men pass.' Everon exclaimed jesting still, pointing to Shatz the rear door, with a sardonic smile; and turning his head back, he made a hasty sign to Hilla, urging her to join them.

The lone policeman that was stationed at the rear door was smiling as they approached him, but stiffened to attention and saluted Everon obediently, as Everon was leading them out. While passing the saluting policeman Everon with a shade of a haughty smile uttered a short 'C'a va' to the policeman, and that was it they were on the other side of that miserable building.

On a stretch of cracked asphalt long and narrow, some twenty feet wide; which was fenced on its exterior and was in fact the terminal's exit, the three of them stopped and waited.

A few cars were parked on the opposite side, next to the tall fence. There under the scorching sunrays, they stood all alone.

'Well, where is your husband now?' Everon turned to Hilla Priel with an emphasized note of reproach, which could leave one with the impression that delays and some other mishaps were Priel's specialties.

'He won't be long, and he'll catch up with us in just a moment or two I'm sure,' she answered him dryly with a marked tone of disdain.

She bleeds still and she hasn't forgiven him yet. Shatz thought gloomily. He has just met them and except their names he does not know the tiniest detail about them, yet their personal feuds have already been exposed to him.

While he was wiping his forehead with his soaked handkerchief, and turned around he saw Priel's tall figure emerging out of the terminal rear door.

'There he is!' Shatz called out relieved, as if he has taken some heavy burden off his shoulders.

With a few quick strides of his long legs, Priel hastened to join them.

'I was sure I'll catch up with you in the hall, you did it quite fast.' He added catching up his short breath, smiling apologetically at Everon.

'Where's the suitcase?' Everon asked him watching his inferior's empty hands.

'I've put it in my car's boot.'

'Well then,' Everon summed the matter up briskly. 'Move it to mine and let's get out of here.'

Without waiting for Priel's answer, he crossed the stretch of asphalt and headed to the parked cars, on the opposite side of the small parking lot. As he got near a brand new one, he pulled a bundle of keys out of his pants' pocket and circled the car, checking it from every possible angle; after having opened the front doors he turned back and looked at Shatz with a long inquiring look, a look that had a pretty clear message in it. While Shatz and the Priels were still on their way, Shatz was going toward Everon's car and the Priels towards their own one; Everon has already opened up his car's boot, and leaving it wide open, he settled in his car's front seat before Shatz managed to board it. The heat in the parked car was almost intolerable, and made Shatz regret he did board it. He sat on beside Everon in silence and was waiting impatiently for the coming change, any change but a quick and drastic one. They had to wait until Moshe Priel, who was trudging along with Shatz's suitcase, would put it at last in Everon's car. Shatz could hear him load it and then the thud, as Priel shut the boot's lid; two more seconds passed rather slowly, and there was Priel's tall bent frame, at Everon's window.

'Okay,' he informed a job done to Everon, and turned to Shatz over Everon's head. 'We'll see you than tonight, at the embassy.'

'Sure, no doubt,' Everon retorted, switching on the car's engine and engaging its reverse gear. He drove the car backwards and eased it around, right away, to the middle of the asphalt stretch leaving Priel well behind them.

Everon was driving slowly at first, and raised his right arm through the open window, and waved it in a kind of a farewell gesture to the Priels without looking back. Shatz turned his head back with mixed feelings, to take his leave of the Priels. He did not like Everon's rude behavior, but was glad to be on the move at last; the Priels were too far off already, and he could not hear them, nor see any of their well-intended gestures.

'Congratulations, you've joined the club.' Everon declared sarcastically, pushing his leg down on the accelerator a bit harder; holding the steering wheel with his left hand, his right elbow leaning on his open window's sill. He was driving the car on that narrow and neglected asphalt strip, at about ninety kilometers per hour already, but the rate of their speed was growing up steadily.

'So, what's left for us to do is to settle you temporarily in our hotel.' He muttered, as if he was speaking to himself.

'It isn't ranked as a five star hotel, and I don't intend to keep back that piece of information from you.' He went on glancing at Shatz.

'I don't know yet of course what your own expectations are on such issues, and what you're accustomed to. Anyhow, you'll have to stay there until the Priels whom you replace would leave, and would evacuate their lodgings for your sake.'

'Is it the only hotel in town?' Shatz asked him surprised.

'Sorry to admit it, yes, it's the only one but it is quiet a tolerable abode although its deplorable exterior; it has a good restaurant though, a fact which might console you a bit.'

As Shatz wasn't what one could have termed as an experienced gourmet, and did not aspire to be one he did not comment.

'You're, how should I put it into words properly, an agronomist, am I right? I mean in both ways, in using the right term and in assuming that you are such a person?'

'That's right, that's what I am.' Shatz answered him briskly.

'That's a real positive change. And that's good news indeed.' Everon remarked, with satisfaction.

'Priel isn't a bad fellow, but in weighing his professional capabilities, he isn't what I've expected him to be to my regret; and taking into account this certain point of view, I believe I did a very good bargain.'

As the nature of the relationship that existed between Everon and Priel was not known to him at all, Shatz did not rush into hasty conclusions. He turned his face towards Everon, and exchanged a smile of mutual understanding with him.

Priel was on his way back home in any case; while he on the other hand, had to build up and maintain a good relationship with Everon, who was after all the delegation's head. His outbursts of bad temper and impatience are the outcome of the heat, combined with the high rate of humidity.

On top of it all, he had to wait for quite a while in that neglected airport for my landing. Shatz thought with much hope and optimism. Every garment that covered Shatz's skin was soaked with his own perspiration, but it seemed to him as if he got used to it already, while he turned his attention with much curiosity to watch the landscape out of the car's window.

Right in front of them, against the horizon, beneath the low hanging clouds, Mouaka floated up before their eyes, through the car's windshield. A light and wide strip speckled with dark bluish-gray spots of vegetation and empty spaces between the many groups of buildings that were growing bigger and bigger as they were approaching the Coast of Hope capital.

The huts and shacks that were an integral part of that city were scattered all over the plain before them.

The spots, lines and specks of just a few seconds ago were becoming clearer and bigger. They were moving fast in a total solitude, on the narrow asphalt road while crossing that vast plain.

Some twenty minutes earlier, the Priels were still lagging somewhere behind them, but right now they vanished. and were completely out of sight.

The car's rate of speed was growing up constantly; Shatz could feel it very clearly. As he sneaked a look at the speedometer he missed a heartbeat in alarm, the needle danced around one hundred and forty...

'That's nothing for that car.' Everon demonstrated his skills as a potential race driver, with a cold-blooded nonchalance mixed with pride. He was expecting that chance to come, for quite a while.

'There's Mouaka in front of us.' He went on monotonously.

'Just a bit bigger than an average village, in this country,' he added, expressing unconsciously his deep contempt, and the disgust the sight of this town causes him.

'Do you see that building on top of that lone green hill? That's the hotel.'

Shatz was too tired and a bit shocked still, to wish to offer any opinion or any comment on any matter.

Within two minutes drive, they have reached the outskirts of town and a lone crossroads right after it, which led to the hotel through a double curve serpentine mounting slightly upwards.

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