ASH ON THE VINE

MICHELLE SHINE

ALSO BY MICHELLE SHINE

FICTION

Mesmerised

Song for Ria

The Subtle Art of Healing

NON-FICTION

What About the Potency?

What About Homeopathy?

For Lily

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About the Author

Michelle Shine is the author of: *Mesmerised*, a historical novel about the Impressionists, narrated by their friend, fellow artist, doctor and homeopath Paul Gachet. *The Subtle Art of Healing*, which was long listed for the Cinnamon Press novella award in 2007. *Song for Ria*, winner of the Literary Titan Silver Award in 2023.

Hebrew and Yiddish words:

Aliyah – Jewish immigration to the Holy Land.

Barmitzvah – a coming of age ritual in Judaism.

Baruch Hashem – thank God

B'seder – okay

Harissa – chilli sauce (Arabic)

Ken – yes

Mazel tov – congratulations

Mishigas – madness

Tzedakah – charity

Shalom – peace

Shtetl – a Jewish village in Eastern Europe before WWII

Hatikvah – A 19th century Zionist hymn, now Israel's national anthem.

Sayyid – master (Arabic)

Shabbat – the day of rest

TILL

Ella

Ella's eyes fell on Sami, her granddaughter, twenty years old, in army uniform. She almost choked on the flicker of a memory from when she was about that age, trying to writhe like a snake upon the floor, a man's putrid breath on her face, his hand at her throat. And then, just like that, the flashback was gone. It was 1989 again and Ella was sitting among her whole family in the hospitality room of the winery, set back from the vineyard in the Mount Carmel foothills. Everyone was gathered around the low table in front of the bar, getting ready to savour the last but one bottle of 1976 Granache that had been gathering dust for thirteen years. Ella leaned down to pat Nickolas, the chocolate-brown Labrador at her feet, and her heart lurched, eyes widening with an intake of breath at the juxtaposition of present and past.

'Are you okay, Ima?' Avi, her daughter sitting opposite, asked.

'Yes,' Ella replied, shaking her head as if the question was nonsensical.

'Are you sure?'

'Of course I'm sure.'

'Sure you're sure?'

'Hey, Avi, she's fine. Leave your mother alone,' David, Ella's husband, remonstrated as he leant forward to grab a handful of nuts from one of the serving dishes.

'Let's open the wine,' Saul, Avi's husband, said, standing up and grabbing the bottle that, up until that moment, had stood on the table like a statue to be admired. With his tongue kissing his upper lip, he inserted the corkscrew and pulled until the pop freed his hand. He sniffed the cork, then passed it to Avi, who, still taking in its scent, fixed her gaze upon Ella.

'I'm fine,' Ella said, and then Sami's quietude got to her and a watery, misty veil blurred her eyes. She willed a sense of numbness to resume its residence inside her.

Saul poured, and as the wine glugged, anticipation grew. 'L'chaim and happy birthday, Sami!' he said, raising his own glass, and everyone chorused their good wishes, looking towards Sami as she disappeared inside a corona of sunlight.

Avi sampled the wine first. 'Wow, wow, wow!' she said.

Then Sami took a sip and said quietly, 'It's wonderful, Abba.'

Saul swirled, sucked and swallowed. He held his glass high to the light and said, 'Such great legs. You know, I always worry when I taste wine as good as this that we'll never be able to produce such excellence again.'

'Why wouldn't we?' David said, and after rolling a soupçon around his tongue, continued with, 'I see what you mean.'

Ella held the liquid in her mouth for quite some time, her eyes clearing while she concentrated on the taste. She eventually came out with, 'It's really good.'

David leaned back. 'You are the mistress of understatement, Liba.'

Ella stood then to go and fetch the cakes and biscuits from the kitchen. Nickolas shook off his lethargy and trotted after her. Sami followed too. In the hallway, she grabbed her grandmother's arm. 'Lala.'

'I'm just going to get the cakes.'

'I need to know something.'

'Right now, you need to know something?'

'Yes.'

'So tell me, what is so important?'

'All the things I asked you as a child, questions you used to wave away as if they were flies, well, I'd like to know the answers to them.'

'I don't recall …'

'About your life before you came to Israel.'

Ella pulled her hand from Sami's grasp. She was just about to turn away, get moving towards the door, on a mission to satisfy the appetites of the rest of her family with something homemade and sweet, when Sami said, 'See, you're doing it again. That's what you always do – act like I haven't said anything. Just brush away my words and wipe the slate clean. But that's not how it works, because even though I don't really know anything about your past, I have been damaged by it.'

Ella could feel a strange vibration in her head that muddled her thoughts and took her out of the present. She thought she might faint and leant against the wall. When she looked up, Sami's eyes were like a deer's. Nickolas was licking one of her ankles.

'Are you okay, Lala?'

Sami became like a carer then, linking an arm through Ella's, inching her away from the wall. 'Let's go and sit in your office. I need to tell you something.'

They moved through the hallway together, Ella trying hard not to be pathetic, to be stronger, walk faster. Sami opened the office door. Nickolas slipped in before them, making circles, then ultimately slumping down against the door like an overlarge draught excluder. They sat opposite each other, a role reversal with Sami behind the desk, her long dark hair falling like curtains on both sides of her pretty face, and Ella sitting forward on the sofa opposite.

'It's cool in here,' Sami said.

Ella felt both numb and afraid.

'Are you alright, Lala?'

Ella could feel her eyes burning from suppressed tears. Sami's chestnut eyes were glazed too.

'I'm so sorry to tell you this. It's not easy for me, but I have to say it. The army are worried about me. My lack of attention span. My introversion and desire to be alone. When I told them

I've always been like this, they gave me a more menial job. But just recently they introduced me to someone called Gideon.'

'Gideon? Gideon who?'

'It doesn't matter. He is doing a PhD on Holocaust survivors and their descendants. The army thought he might be able to help me. I've seen him a few times. He asked what was wrong with me. I said, "Nothing." He said that all the girls are painting their nails and doing their hair between army training. That any moment they have free, fast as the wind, they're off. They love music, films, drinking, dancing. Sometimes they even love each other. He said, "I hear that's not the case with you." He asked what's happening in my life, why I'm so sad all the time and don't want to join in with any frivolity. I *wanted* to tell him, but when I opened my mouth, I couldn't speak. He wanted to know if something's happening at home. I just burst into tears and told him I've always felt like a piece of me is missing. It's like I have this dread, this emptiness, deep sadness and yearning. He said it's like I'm in mourning. I told him I haven't lost anyone. He said, "Maybe not, but you have ancestral history." I asked him, "What does that even mean?" He said it means I should be asking questions at home. He wanted to know if I have grandparents still alive who came to this country after the Holocaust. I told him yes. He said I should ask you to tell me things.' Sami drew in a deep breath. 'But I couldn't do it until now. The army makes you tough, so I'm tougher and ready to ask. Please share your story with me, Lala.'

Nickolas shifted and whined. Ella pulled a handkerchief from inside her sleeve and squeezed it like a stress ball. She looked at her lap, focused on a crease in her skirt and wondered why the air conditioning was still on. She should have turned it off yesterday evening before leaving the room. Was she becoming forgetful or had someone else been in there, and if so, who, and what did they want?

'I don't think you realise what this feeling is like inside me

that stops me living like everyone else. I think it's because I'm frightened of life. I remember when I was about six and there was something that was making Ima cry and you didn't want me to know about it. You said I was too young to know about such things, and Ima said that everyone should know about it, and you said, "Everyone does know about it, but in Israel we can choose not to spoil someone's childhood." I remember thinking Ima was sick and dying or there were going to be big bombs blowing up the whole of Israel and I was to become an orphan and have to find another country to live in, alone, because none of my family would be alive anymore. I wondered who I was going to be able to trust and what I was going to eat. It worried me for weeks. When I found out the secret was Ima's childhood friend Benjamin was attacked by a Palestinian and in a critical state, I'm ashamed to say I felt relieved, and I had to live with that too. So I'm asking you, Lala. It's what I want for my birthday from you – the passport to a less lonely and less neurotic life.'

Sami stood, and as if just making her request had given her the confidence, she perched on the front edge of the desk with legs and arms crossed. Nickolas stood up, shook himself, then sat next to Ella. She patted his head and eventually looked up from the solace of her dog. Her lips were pursed, but she was nodding. When she spoke, it was with a frog in her throat. 'Okay, but not today.'

'You've made me wait all my life. I have to go back to the army tomorrow.'

Ella inhaled deeply.

'Give me some hope, Lala – something to digest while I'm living in the barracks. Just a snippet – give me that. We start your story tonight. Okay?'

Ella didn't say no.

Sami pushed herself away from the desk and kissed her grandmother on the top of her head. 'I'll get the cakes,' she said

before leaving the room.

It was odd that no one had come to find them; they'd been in the office for quite a while. Did they all know that Sami was going to insist Ella uncover her past so that she could use it as medicine? Not David, he would never have agreed to it, but then again, David was a lot more courageous than Ella – or was he? Maybe he was just a sentimentalist, a romantic. How could she tell Sami the truth? It would destroy everything Avi and Sami thought they knew about her and consequently about themselves. Their relationships would be torn apart. Didn't everyone realise there was a reason she always deflected their questions and never wished to reflect on her past, either alone or in company?

She already knew what she would tell Sami after the party. She would begin the tale – incited by this emotional blackmail – with an anecdote from when Sami was eight or nine and the family had just moved into the vineyard. It would be an easy place to start, an introduction, revealing nothing, while she contemplated how to unfold the rest.

'Oh god,' she said out loud while manoeuvring herself out of the chair. Her joints were stiff – that meant rain. Good for the crops, but not so good for getting about. She turned off the air conditioning; its rushing sound immediately ceased. The silence was uncomfortable. As she opened the door, she was hit by amicable voices in conversation and a yellow light spilling out of the hospitality room. Ella walked towards the din. Nickolas followed.

The bottle of vintage Granache was empty and sitting on the draining board in the kitchen, along with two other more recent empties that the cellar wouldn't miss and a half-full decanter of whisky. Plates dotted with crumbs and smudged with chocolate, baked apple and pastry sat stacked in the sink, along with eight glasses exuding the scent of alcohol.

Most of the cakes and biscuits had been eaten. Preparing to put the leftovers away, Ella broke one of her nails beyond the quick trying to get a tin open. The sharp, unnerving pain had her shaking her hand and sucking on her finger.

'What's happened, Ima?'

'I broke my nail.'

'Sit down. I'll clear up the rest.'

Avi pulled out a chair from under the kitchen table and went to take her mother's elbow, but Ella resisted. 'No, it's okay, Avi. I can still do everything.'

Ella went over to the sink and cupped both hands under the tap. Blood ran with the water. Ella grabbed the washing-up liquid and started washing her hands. 'I'm okay,' she said.

'I'll get you a plaster.'

Avi carried a chair over to the other side of the kitchen and climbed onto it, stretching up high to reach the first aid kit on the top shelf of the medicine cupboard. She insisted her mother do nothing while waiting for her to get the box down. Ella wiped her hands roughly on a clean tea towel.

'If the nail rips, it'll be worse. Please, Ima.'

Ella waited impatiently during every protracted second, through Avi pulling the protective wrapping off the plaster and carefully placing the square of lint over the split nail and sealing down the wings, not loosely but not too tight.

'How's that?' she asked.

'Thank you, Avi. It's alright now.'

'You still want to wash up?'

Ella was just about to reply when Avi looked her in the eye and said, 'I just want to say that I know Sami spoke to you earlier and I know it's going to be hard for you to do what she's asked. None of us in this family are insensitive to what you must have gone through. But I am second-generation victim. Sami is third. Perhaps as a family we can find a way to move on, Ima.'

Ella tried to swallow back the tear that rested in the corner

of her eye. She didn't want to cry. If she cried, she would lose the barricade that had been protecting her all those years. So she said nothing and stood very still before leaving the room.

Nickolas was waiting at the foot of the stairs to accompany her. He always retired with her. His bed was the floor just outside her closed bedroom door. But she didn't go upstairs. She went outside instead.

It was twilight – a clear sky, stars winking, a crescent moon. Ella sat on the bench in the courtyard. Yellow lighting from the cellar shone through the skylights under her feet. Saul was in the cellar.

It appeared to Ella that the day had passed too quickly like a long intake of breath. So much had happened. She needed to process it all, which was not something she usually liked to do.

The day had begun with light pouring out from all sides of the yellow, unlined curtains. She caught her breath whenever she saw this ordinary spectacle that meant she was still alive. At first, she never knew whether that was a good thing or not; excitement and fear felt the same. When it was left to David, he never shut the curtains properly. He didn't understand how deeply trauma was sewn into her being. The sound of a white-eared bulbul in the pomegranate tree was comforting, and she focused on that.

Later came the overwhelming elation of seeing Sami sway up to the vineyard in her army uniform, trekking boots kicking up dust and rucksack slung over her shoulder. Small pleasures that she treasured. Making pancakes with strong black coffee and fresh orange juice for the birthday breakfast. All doors and windows open, inviting a warm breeze and sometimes flies, which were not so welcome. The family's chatter, which Ella listened to in the way others listened to music, for cadence more than intellectual meaning. Her role in the family was to nurture with food and keep them safe with cleanliness.

In the entrance to the winery, a brass 'closed' sign hung

on the door handle. The family had sat under the tree, which by eleven had retracted its shade, and it became too hot to stay there. They all agreed to retreat into the bar, which they predominantly used for entertaining wine merchants from all over the world. By twelve they were chinking glasses of the finest wine they had on site.

And then Sami's words.

Ella shifted on the bench. There was a faint glint of evening sunlight, red and sinking behind the distant trees. She could hear dry foliage crunching underfoot, a sound from her long-ago past. Her teenage breath visible in the cold morning air. The nauseating scent of pine making her shiver.

She had left the hideaway because she needed to pee. 'Gavriella, don't let them see you. Don't let them hear you,' came her mother's voice in her ear. But that, in itself, was an impossible task when just breathing was exposing. The whole of life was encased in the fear of giving away clues to their whereabouts.

A bird screeched. An unseen animal scuttled to her left. A few moments of silence were followed by carefree German voices, all male, interspersed with Lithuanian voices. They were so near, so loud. Each one distinctive – even the least resonant words of a boy could be discerned by listening carefully. Laughter. A gunshot. Ella, crouching down, knickers around her ankles, pressing her back against the widest tree trunk she could find, hoping the whoosh and splatter of her urine wasn't audible to anyone but herself. Hoping her instinct to pee there was correct and the group of militias was not going to approach from behind or side on. There were distant crackles of twigs and branches. She almost fell forward onto her face but managed to stop herself. With trembling hands she pulled up her knickers.

Hearing the sound of her own breath in her ears, she crawled towards a bush and parted its foliage; she saw children, enough to fill a whole classroom, all girls, standing together in a crowd

as if waiting for their picture to be taken. Two men in uniform had machine guns, which they raised in unison and pointed at the girls. The rat-a-tat-tat had the girls falling backwards into a ditch like targets at a fairground. The Lithuanian man and boy were spectators.

Shivering with fear and too frightened to move, Ella stayed there until darkness, the astringent scent of pine filling her nostrils. It was late when her father found her and walked her back to their hideout.

David

David found Ella lying on top of their bed, embryonic, shuddering, facing away from him towards the window. He sat down beside her, put a hand on her hip and waited.

'I'm freezing,' she whispered. 'And I can't stop shaking.'

'It's okay. Everything will be okay. I'm here,' he whispered back. 'Come,' he said, encouraging her to sit up, which she forced herself to do. She asked how she could tell the rest of the family the truth when it was going to be devastating for them to hear, and for him.

He said he'd handle it and maybe it was time for them to know the truth. 'When we go, our pasts will go with us.'

'I always thought that was a good thing.'

'Me too, but maybe it's not, Ella.'

He held her, but she remained rigid in his arms. Holding on to her elbows, he pulled back and studied her blue eyes, milky with unspent tears. He put one finger under her chin and brought her lips forward to gently touch his own.

'I haven't the strength,' she said.

'I'll help you.'

Later, David stood in the hallway, a little to one side of Sami's bedroom door, which was ajar. Nickolas was lying across the threshold. The women were in there. The bedroom was a smaller version of the one he shared with Ella, only this one had dual aspect over the vineyard. During the day, the room was filled with light. But the atmosphere was sombre now with only the bedside lamps on, and through a slice of window he could see a mist veiling the moon and stars.

Turning towards the stairwell, he held on to the bannister with both hands. The paintings on the walls were by a local artist, a survivor of Bergen-Belsen – bold primary colours, rounded

shapes and horror-struck faces.

David imagined Avi and Sami sitting on the bed while Ella stood with her back to one of the windows. He strained to hear what she was saying.

'Okay, girls, I'm sharing a memory with you. It's not one you want to hear, I know, but you have to understand that every memory is difficult for me. We have lots of archaeological sites in Israel. Many times I've watched them working to uncover bits of the past, and I know you have to remove the topsoil to see what's buried inside the earth. So now we're removing the topsoil, and this happened when Sami was young, around nine years old. Baba David sat in an armchair in the living room looking out the window at our infant vines. He said, "Samijoon, do you know what it's like to make wine from grapes grown on this biblical land?"

'"No, Baba," she said.

'He nodded, lit a cigar, appraised it, turned towards Sami, who sat on the footstool beside him with questions she never knew how to verbalise, and he said, "This is how I celebrate."

'"What are you celebrating?" she asked.

'"Making sense of things at last."

'"What kinds of things?"

'"Life."

'Samijoon followed her baba's gaze to beyond the transparent glass in the wooden frame and saw newly turned earth with bent splitting sticks, line after line after line of them staked into the ground, and she wanted to understand.

'"Why did you get thrown out of Iraq, Baba?" she asked.

'"That is a very good question, and it depends who you ask. If you're asking me …"

'"I am." Sami nodded to assure him.

'"Your lala would say I'm too generous. She would say …"

'I was sitting on the stairs looking through some post that had just arrived. I heard everything and came into the room at

that moment to say, "David, what are you telling our sweet girl about me?"

'"Nothing, Liba. I was just going to tell her that after generations of my family living and working in Iraq – amongst people we considered to be friends – I had to leave without money or possessions because, as it turned out, our friends were not really our friends. I was a young man – although not as young as you, Liba – but I have kept my good memories."

'"Ugh, your Baba D is a sentimentalist," I said.

'"Of course I am. Our family had very good times in Basra. We lived close to the port. We exported silk to all over the world. It was a romantic era, Samijoon."

'Baba D took a sepia photo out of his pocket. Cracked and crumbling at the edges, it was hard to see the features of anyone's face except that of a young boy – wearing white shorts, white shirt, white socks and sandals – squinting inside a ray of sunlight. Sami had asked about his identity so many times that to humour her, Baba D asked, "Do you want to know who that is?"

'She nodded and Baba D said, "He is the sentimentalist."

'The others in the photo were Baba D's parents and his older brother and sister. Everyone was dressed so formally, the women in modest dresses of lace and silk, the men in linen and cotton. They were all standing in a room with a high ceiling, wooden tables, polished oak floor and silk furnishings. Balcony doors behind them were flung open onto a canal, like Venice but not Venice – Nahr al-Yahud, River of the Jews, in Basra, Iraq.

'Baba D waited until his liba left the room – but she was still within earshot – when he asked Sami, "Well, would you want to leave such a wonderful place?"'

David smiled; they had that in common, his wife and himself, they were both good with words. It was, perhaps, the first thing that had attracted them to each other – but then again, no, that wasn't correct. Back then, forty-three years ago

– another lifetime – in the autumn of 1946, they were in Atlit detention camp in British Mandatory Palestine, two rugged, displaced souls. He came from the Middle East. She came from Eastern Europe. They didn't even speak the same language. The only thing they had in common was the desperate desire to enter the land of their ancestors and make it their home – a wish that was denied to them by the British authorities acceding to Arab demand.

What made it worse was that for some strange reason, while they were there, a German officer was admitted to the camp and was given the job of keeping the unruly and protesting Jews in their place. No one went near him. Everyone shrank from his presence whenever he was in sight.

David remembered the first time he had seen Ella. It was outside the large tent where they received their meals. He'd walked past her, sitting on the ground, knees to chest, one hand holding back a mass of wavy auburn curls, watching him as he walked through the entrance to discover the German officer eating in there alone, among a roomful of trestle tables between empty benches. He'd walked swiftly out again, sat down next to Ella and introduced himself, first in Arabic, then in Hebrew and finally in English, which she understood.

She told him that she wasn't English but she'd had to learn it. She'd been evading being caught by their enemies for what felt like a very long time. And him? She hadn't seen him before.

He could see it now, the whole scene playing out like a movie in his mind. The sweat bubbles breaking out on his forehead and trying to hide his concern that he might have been blushing.

'I've come via India, where I stayed with my uncle. I talked about Eretz Israel so much, he said, "Why don't you just go there?" So here I am.'

'You were safe in India?'

'Yes.'

'And you chose to come here, to a detention camp?'

She was smiling. He couldn't decide whether she was incredulous or flirting.

'I'm an Arab. I thought they'd let me in.'

'A Jewish Arab?'

'Yes. Why are you laughing?'

David took the only photo he had of his family out of a cardboard wallet and showed it to Ella.

The smile was gone. 'Where are they?' she asked.

He glanced up at the sky and said, 'I don't know.'

'Were they not safe there? Wherever this was taken.'

'Iraq, and no, but they didn't want to leave.'

She was quiet then, head bent, eyes to the ground, taking up a handful of grit and letting it slide through her fingers. Eventually she looked at him and said, 'I'm sorry.'

'Maybe one day I'll find them,' he responded, but he knew he never would.

In the photo he was ten years old, and over the next few days, David spoke to Ella about being that boy, growing up in the knowledge that his family had lived in Iraq for centuries. How he was very proud of his grandfather, his namesake, David Ben David, whom he had never actually had the chance to meet. His grandfather had been a trader who advised the Ottoman rulers on the finer details of successfully importing and exporting goods.

David's father had said that his grandfather, despite his acuity for business, was a good Jew. Brought up, as all children in the family had been for generations, to always remember to give *tzedakah*, pay his taxes and be loving towards all members of his family, even though, maybe, he was a little too absent; it was a male family trait. Sometimes he was able to win a big order by being a little more shrewd than his competitors, but that was something else; in Iraq, in the game of life, all manner of bargaining and debating were fair dues.

The family lived in a large house with a balcony overlooking

the Tigris. During British rule the exterior of the house had been decorated in a smart Mesopotamian style, the exterior walls the colour of sand and randomly inset with patterned tiles depicting wildlife and flowers. Inside, the walls were wood panelled and had high ceilings with electric fans. Slatted blinds and white cotton sheets in the bedrooms. Velvet furniture, mahogany tables and sideboards in the sitting and dining rooms. Cut glass chandeliers and decanters on silver platters that threw rainbows around the family rooms when hit by sun rays.

David was born in 1911, the youngest of five siblings. After his grandfather, David Ben David, died of a gastrointestinal infection in the year before David's birth, his father, Eliyahu, carried on the family business and was even more distant as a parent than his own father.

Apart from that, David couldn't think of a bad thing, a really bad thing, that had happened to him growing up. As the baby in the family, he was loved and doted on by everyone except his father. Yes, he could appreciate the sensuousness of trading in silk and spices across the world, but that wasn't his calling, and his father's inability to accept him as he was was a wound David had to bear his whole life.

The worst thing he could think of was when he was about eight years old, he was asked to stand in front of the class and read a paragraph aloud. He had been stunned by his own nerves and stumbled on every word. The class laughed at him. He held the hurt inside until he returned home, where he watched his own tears slide down his cheeks in the mirror that hung on the inside of his mother's wardrobe door.

He told Ella how when he was twelve, his uncle Eleazar came all the way from India for the marriage of Aunt Devorah, who was also named after his grandfather. David's parents were observant, traditional. His mother was dutiful. Aunt Devorah was similar to his mother in her traditional ways. But Eleazar was different. He wasn't married, and he played the santoor

professionally in a group of musicians. He played at Devorah's wedding, a fine affair held in a great hall. Gilt chairs with red velvet cushions were placed around tables covered with white tablecloths and laid with heavy silver cutlery and bone china crockery. The guests ate spicy soup with dumplings, followed by beans and meatballs in a harissa sauce served with rice and pickled lemons. After the main course, large bowls of sticky dried fruits and nuts were served with yoghurt, accompanied by tiny glasses of thick Arabian coffee. Children slid across the heavy wooden floor. Women talked and ululated. Men drank whisky or tapped a beat on the table while watching the belly dancing.

On the morning after the wedding, David found his uncle sitting on the floor of the balcony overlooking the Tigris. He was playing his instrument and invited David to tap a rhythm on the goblet drum he'd brought for him all the way from India. After the impromptu session, Eleazar said he knew David would enjoy the drum. He had known it ever since his first trip to Basra when David was just a toddler. From then on, all David wanted to do was drum, on everything, everywhere, anytime, anyplace.

At fifteen, he too was a player in a group of musicians. They played in government buildings and at parties given by those in the banking profession, as well as merchant dos and the usual weddings and barmitzvahs.

Three years later, indisputable changes had taken place in society. Germans were everywhere, importing their own brand of antisemitism. David's family couldn't see it, didn't want to see it. It was dangerous for Jews to go about in the streets. His father said there had been antisemitism throughout the generations in Iraq, but whenever it stirred, it hit like a wave and then settled down again.

David wrote to Eleazar in Cochin.

'Is this why you left for India – antisemitism?'

'No,' Eleazar replied. 'It's because I wasn't accepted by my family as a musician!'

'I've joined the Zionist movement,' David responded. 'You are the only one who knows, as the movement is frowned upon by almost everyone here. I want to leave Iraq; antisemitism is rife and even the air is threatening.'

In May 1941 he played his drum as part of a trio at the Baghdad Hotel. It was the beginning of the Farhud. In the large, high-ceilinged room, in front of the mantelpiece, David sat on a carpet at the feet of men in western suits and Middle Eastern thobes who stood side by side with those in Nazi uniform. The swastika flag had been pinned above his head over the fireplace. Heavy wooden doors shut out the sounds on the streets where Jewish businesses were being destroyed. In Jewish homes, young girls were raped in front of their families; children and babies were butchered. You could see in their eyes that everyone knew about it, but no one said a word to stop it happening. David didn't know that was what was going on at the time, but he could sense it – the hatred, the violence. It permeated the atmosphere everywhere he went, and he couldn't understand why his family couldn't feel it too.

When Eleazar wrote to say that he was welcome to come and stay in his home in India, to save himself, he had to leave everything and everyone behind.

He told Ella all of this, and in response she asked him why he was courting her when there were other girls in the camp who were far prettier and would be equally compelled by his stories.

Didn't she realise that he couldn't tell these things to anyone else? It was something about *her* that drew the words out of him. Each time he saw her in the camp, he felt compelled to approach her, talk to her, charm her into warm feelings for him. When he lay down at night, it was her eyes that he saw on the back of his lids, blue, almost violet, and all-knowing even though he could see she was quite a bit younger than him.

He looked at her blankly and faltered.

'I'm pregnant,' she said.