DAMASCUS GATE

A NOVEL

ROBERT STONE

ROBERT STONE

DAMASCUS GATE

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
BOSTON NEW YORK

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Stone, Robert, date.
Damascus Gate / Robert Stone.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-395-66569-8
I. Title.
PS3569.T6418D36 1998
813'.54 — dc21 97-49615 CIP

Printed in the United States of America

Book design: Robert Overholtzer
Endpaper maps: Jacques Chazaud

QUM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

The author is grateful for permission to quote lines from the following: "V. Cape Ann" from *Collected Poems 1909–1962* by T. S. Eliot, copyright 1936 by Harcourt Brace & Company, copyright © 1964, 1963 by T. S. Eliot, reprinted by permission of the publisher. "Rillons, Rillettes" from *The Mind-Reader*, copyright © 1966 and renewed 1994 by Richard Wilbur, reprinted by permission of Harcourt Brace & Company.

FOR CANDIDA

Enigma and evasion grow;
And shall we never find Thee out?

— HERMAN MELVILLE, *Clarel*

PART ONE

1

Jerusalem, 1992

THAT MORNING Lucas was awakened by bells, sounding across the Shoulder of Hinnom from the Church of the Dormition. At first light there had been a muezzin's call in Silwan, insisting that prayer was better than sleep. The city was well supplied with divine services.

He climbed out of bed and went into the kitchen to brew Turkish coffee. As he stood at the window drinking it, the first train of the day rattled past, bound over the hills for Tel Aviv. It was a slow, decorous colonial train, five cars of nearly empty coaches with dusty windows. Its diminishing rhythms made him aware of his own solitude.

When the train was gone, he saw the old man who lived in one of the Ottoman houses beside the tracks watering a crop of kale in the early morning shade. The kale was deep green and fleshy against the limestone rubble from which it somehow grew. The old man wore a black peaked cap. He had high cheekbones and a ruddy face like a Slavic peasant's. The sight of him made Lucas imagine vast summer fields along which trains ran, long lines of gray boxcars against a far horizon. Once Lucas dreamed of him.

He had grapefruit and toast for breakfast and read the morning's *Jerusalem Post*. A border policeman had been stabbed in the Nuseirat camp in the Gaza Strip but was expected to recover. Three Palestinians had been shot to death by Shin Bet hit squads, one in Rafah, two in Gaza City. *Haredim* in Jerusalem had demonstrated against the Hebrew University's archeological dig near the Dung Gate; ancient Jewish burial sites were being uncovered. Jesse Jackson was threatening to organize a boycott against major league baseball. In

India, Hindus and Muslims were fighting over a shrine that probably predated both of their religions. And, in a story from Yugoslavia, he saw again the phrase "ethnic cleansing." He had come across the evocative expression once or twice during the winter.

There was also a full-page story on the number of foreign pilgrims visiting the country for Passover and Western Holy Week. Lucas was surprised to find himself overtaken by the holidays.

He dressed and took a second cup of coffee out on his tiny balcony. The day was innocently glorious; spring sunlight scented the pines and sparkled on the stone walls of Emek Refaim. For weeks he had been postponing work on an article about the Sinai he had contracted to write for Condé Nast. The deadline had passed the previous Friday, and before long they would be phoning him for it. Still, the fine weather inclined him to truancy. When at last he went to his desk, his open appointment book confirmed the date: Easter Sunday in the Latin church and also the sixteenth of Nisan. Passover had arrived the day before. On a sudden impulse Lucas decided to go over to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Bethlehem Road was nearly free of traffic. In spite of its elderly population, Lucas's neighborhood in the German Colony was the most secular in the city and its atmosphere was never one of piety. Old couples strolled in the spring sunshine. The day before, he had seen a few young families loading their Volvos for camping trips in the desert or the Galilee. But walking up the nearly deserted avenue, past the terraces of the Cinematheque, under the ramparts of the Church of Scotland Hospice adorned with its bonny blue flag, he could feel the gravity of the ancient city across the canyon. A hundred tour buses were parked in the streets under the Old City walls. At the distant Jaffa Gate, he could see the swaying forms of mounted policemen herding a pressing crowd of bright pilgrims. At the other end of the fortress, a line of devotees toiled single file up the slope to the Zion Gate.

He walked down into the shadow of the valley, over the bridge by the Sultan's Pool and past the Koranic verse carved in the shell of the Ottoman fountain. "All that is created comes of water," it read. Then, humbled by the looming walls, he trudged up the ascent to Zion.

On the path to Zion Gate, he walked mainly among Orthodox Jewish men in black, bound for the Western Wall. Some of the Jews tried to converse with each other as they climbed, scrambling along

the shoulder to keep pace. Besides the *haredim,* there were a few German Catholics on the path because the Dormition Abbey above them was a German church. These pilgrims were of the era before Germans had become once again thin and handsome; many were florid and overweight, too bulkily dressed and perspiring freely. Yet they seemed happy. Most of the men looked plain and decent; they wore sodality pins and carried missals. Some of the women had sweet angelic faces. If they were sixty, Lucas calculated . . . born 1932, thirteen at the end of the war. He had picked up the habit of calculating Germans' ages from the Israelis.

It was a cheerful climb, with a smell of sage and jasmine on the wind and desiccated wildflowers underfoot and voices in Hebrew, Yiddish, German. The great walls reduced everyone, confounding all kingdoms. As he neared the ridge, the bells began again.

Following the file toward the gate, he thought of a prophecy, in a *Midrash* someone had related to him. At the End of Days, multitudes would try to cross the Valley of Hinnom to the holy city. Christians, traversing a bridge of stone, would fall to perdition. Muslims, on a wooden bridge, would follow them. Then the Jews would cross, glorified, on a bridge of gossamer. What about me, Lucas wondered, not for the first time.

The top of the trail was paved and provided for by the Jews of Canada. At its end, the mild children of wicked Edom and the pious men of Israel parted in sweet mutual oblivion, the Germans to their hugely unfortunate yellow abbey, the Jews toward the Western Wall. Lucas went his own way, north on Armenian Patriarchate Road. There he encountered more *haredim* headed for the Wall, putting the confusions of Easter behind them. In front of St. James's Cathedral, teenage Armenian acolytes were dressing their ranks for a Sunday procession.

On this conjunction of sacred seasons, the Jews and the Armenians in the crowded street pretended each other's invisibility without colliding. A half-caste apologizing his way through the crush, Lucas was visited by a notion: that only he could see both sects. That where only the unseen mattered, he was reduced to mere utility, to petty observations and staying out of the way.

Passing under an arch where tilesmiths kept shop, he stopped to examine the posters on the wall beside it. They were all in Armenian and many showed the picture of the new president of the Armenian republic. There were also pictures of armed guerrillas with rifles and

bandoliers and black-bordered photographs of young martyrs, slain far away in the Azerbaijani war. It was the season of martyrdom in a banner year for martyrs.

In the main street of the Christian Quarter, a promiscuous babble of pilgrims hurried down the sloping cobbled pavement. One group of Japanese followed a sandaled Japanese friar who held a green pennant aloft. There was a party of Central American Indians of uniform size and shape who stared with blissful incomprehension into the unconvincing smiles of merchants offering knickknacks. There were Sicilian villagers and Boston Irish, Filipinos, more Germans, Breton women in native dress, Spaniards, Brazilians, Québecois.

Palestinian hustlers hissed suggestively, offering guidance. Lucas noticed that the Caravan Bar, his favorite beer joint in the Old City, was shuttered. He had heard something about threats. Cutting through the New Bazaar, he became aware of another closing. Above one of the embroidery shops there had been a loft that once sold not only brass pipes and nargilehs but excellent hashish to smoke in them. Now both shop and loft were derelict. Since the intifada, Lucas had taken to buying his hashish where the thin, handsome German hippies bought theirs, at a kiosk near the Arab bus terminal on Saladin Street. The police never seemed to interfere, Lucas had noticed, probably because the seller was one of their informers.

In the courtyard before the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, he was reunited with the mass of pilgrims. Green-bereted troopers of the Border Police were stationed at every approach to the church and on the adjoining rooftops. Under their guns, the Japanese friar was addressing his flock above the noise of the throng.

The Japanese groups were composed largely of middle-aged women who wore dark jumpers and khaki rain hats of the sort once favored by kibbutzniks. The priest would be telling them, Lucas imagined, the story of Constantine and his mother, Saint Helena — how she had discovered the Holy Sepulchre and the very Rood itself. The Japanese ladies were a motherly lot, and Lucas thought they appeared to like the story. Why not, since it had a pious mother, a dutiful son and a miracle? Then, all at once, he found himself calculating ages again. It had occurred to him that the Franciscan and his party might have come from Nagasaki. Nagasaki had been the most Christian of Japan's cities. All through the war, the Japanese had thought the Americans spared it air raids for that reason.

In the sooty, incensed hollows of the church, he made his way through the rotunda to the undistinguished Catholic chapel in the far corner, moving just ahead of the Japanese. A glum Italian monk stood at the door, snubbing pilgrims who tried to smile at him.

Inside the chapel, some Americans with guitars were plinking unhappily away, accompanying their own sad sing-along of a few socially responsible, with-it numbers from the sacred liturgy of whatever cow college town they called home. Like many visitors, they had been unnerved by the inimitable creepiness of the Holy Sepulchre, a grimly gaudy, theopathical Turkish bathhouse where their childhood saints glared like demented spooks from every moldering wall. Lucas, once born, once baptized, put his hand in the holy water and crossed himself.

"Dark is life, is death," he thought. It was all that came to mind. The text was from Mahler's *Song of the Earth* but he supposed it might be considered a sort of prayer.

"My heart is still and awaits its hour."

He still owned an old record, now nearly unplayable, of his mother singing it in German. In any case, he offered it up to whatever was out there, for whatever purpose. Then he made his way through the press of Japanese and across the gloomy spaces of the Anastasis and up the worn stairs to the Chapel of St. James to hear the Armenian liturgy. Theirs was his favorite.

After a while the Armenians arrived in procession, pausing near the entrance of the church so that their patriarch could kiss the Stone of Unction. Then, preceded by youths carrying candles and monks in pointed hoods, the Armenians of the city trooped up to the chapel and the service began. Lucas, as was his custom, stood off to one side.

For a time, he secretly watched the lustrous-eyed worshipers absorbed in their devotions. The night was always dark in their prayers and everybody far from home. Then — because it was Easter for someone, because the Armenian liturgy was sublime, because it couldn't hurt — he lowered his head in the Jesus Prayer. It was another thing he had picked up around, the mantra of the Oriental Christians, a little like repeating *Nam myoho renge kyo* but with a measure of Berdyayevian soul.

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner."

Properly prayed, repeated, the gaze fixed upon the heart, the breathing controlled — it was supposed to be good for you.

At the very moment of uttering this vain hesychastic repetition, while reflecting on the fond, silly regard for religion he had come to Jerusalem to cure himself of, he was startled from his mooning by a dreadful bellow from the rotunda. Then a rasping scream, echoing dismally through the blasted caverns, freezing the pilgrims in midbliss. Even the Armenians missed a beat, and a few of the children moved to the edge of the loft to see what the matter was. Lucas followed, looking down over the railing.

"Anti-Christus!"

Below, in the candle-lit spaces of the Anastasis, a *majnoon,* a madman, was running wild. Potbellied, bespectacled, arms spread wide, hands dangling, the *majnoon* appeared to be a Western visitor. Around the Chapel of the Tomb he ran, in fluttery, short-legged, birdlike steps. Worshipers fled him. Under the Emperor's Arch and along the wall of the Greek Catholicon, the man ran screaming, setting the hanging sacristy lamps to swing and clatter on their chains. He seemed to be flapping in an attempt at flight, as though he might take wing and sail up to the vault like a church owl. His face was red and round. His eyes bulged sickly blue. A few young Greek Orthodox acolytes in black cassocks were chasing him.

With formidable agility, the madman succeeded in doubling back on his pursuers toward the Chapel of the Tomb. A candle stand full of burning tapers overturned and people fought their way back from the flames. Around and around the tomb he ran, leading the Greeks in a comic rondelay. Then he peeled off and headed for the Chapel of St. Mary. The gathered Catholics gasped and screamed. The friar at the chapel door moved to close it.

Then the *majnoon* began to shout at length in German. Something about blasphemy, Lucas thought. Something about heathen and thieves. Then he began to swear mechanically. "*Fick . . . Gott in Himmel . . . Scheiss . . . Jesusmaria.*" Echoes ricocheted crazily through the interconnected vaults that made up the church. When the Greeks caught him, he switched to English.

"A den of thieves," the deranged German shrieked. "Fornication," he shouted at a prim young Catholic woman in a white mantilla. "Strangulation. Blood."

Some of the Greek Orthodox posse stomped out the flaming tapers while the rest hauled their prisoner toward the door and the shafts of spring sunlight. A party of Israeli policemen were waiting

there to receive him, looking as though they had seen it all before. Around Lucas, the Armenians prayed harder.

The pilgrims pouring out into the forecourt after the service were abuzz with the untoward incident. The soldiers and border policemen lining the route back toward the Jaffa Gate looked more wary and purposeful than usual. Braced for something more serious, they were hoping to herd the mass of tourists out of the Old City. At the same time, they were under orders to let the Christian pilgrims wander at will, as a demonstration of normalcy and order.

He soon drifted with the crowd into the vaulted souks between the Damascus Gate and the Haram al-Sharif. Lucas had come to move confidently through the Old City, although he sometimes questioned his own confidence. He believed his appearance to be more or less foreign, which, in the Muslim Quarter, was a point in his favor. At a kiosk in the Khan al-Sultan souk, he bought an English-language copy of the PLO newspaper *Al-Jihar.* Displayed in hand, it might be a precaution against attack as well as a way of keeping up with the situation.

The Damascus Gate, with its Ottoman towers and passages and barbarous Crusader revetments, was his favorite place in the city. He took a simple tourist's pleasure in the crowds and the blaring taped Arab music, in the rush provided by the open sacks of spices that were piled in wheelbarrows beside the vendors' stalls. To the Palestinians it was the Bab al-Amud, the Gate of the Column, but Lucas rejoiced in the common English name, the suggestion of a route toward mystery, interior light, sudden transformation. He sat for a while over a Sprite, taking in the sensations of the gate, and then set out quixotically in search of something stronger.

Both his regular spot in Christian Quarter Road and the rooftop garden in the souk had inexplicably closed. The one place he found open was a disreputable tourist trap on the edge of the Christian Quarter that catered to *Wandervogel* and other riffraff from the cheap hostels of East Jerusalem. Like many of the bars on the Palestinian side, it displayed pictures of Christian saints lest the Hamas enforcers mistake the management for bad Muslims.

Three young Scandinavian women with shorn hair were drinking mineral water near the street end of the place. He was surprised to find, tending bar in the back, a middle-aged Palestinian named Charles Habib, who had been his host at the Caravan. He

ordered a cold Heineken, and Charles served it to him in a frosted glass.

"I've just come from church," he told his host. "There was a *majnoon.*"

Charles was a Greek Catholic from Nazareth. He had come to Jerusalem by way of South Bend, Indiana.

"Lots of *majnoon,*" he told Lucas. "Plenty."

"I suppose," Lucas said, "God tells them to come."

Charles stared at him without sympathy.

"I mean," Lucas added, "they form that impression."

"The Protestants are worst," Charles said. "They should stay in America and watch television." He paused and regarded Lucas. "You're Protestant?"

"No," Lucas said. He felt uneasy under Charles's scrutiny. "Catholic."

"Every religion has *majnoon,*" Charles observed.

Surprisingly, this was a somewhat new concept in town, where screaming infants had burned before Moloch and the gutters on many occasions had run with blood. But each year, it seemed, the equinoctial moon inspired stranger and stranger doings, usually vaguely Pentecostal in spirit, the spontaneous outpourings of many lands. Once, to be a Protestant had meant to be a decent Yankee schoolmarm or kindly clerical milord. No longer. There had commenced a regular Easter Parade, replete with odd headgear. Anglophone crazies bearing monster sandwich boards screeched empty-eyed into megaphones. Entire platoons of costumed Latin Cristos, dripping blood both real and simulated, appeared on the Via Dolorosa, while their wives and girlfriends sang in tongues or went into convulsions.

Locally decorum, in religion as well as devotion, was prized. One Easter an outraged citizen tossed a bottle at some salsa-dancing fugitives from Cecil B. DeMille; the street stirred and the army ended by firing a few tear-gas canisters. At this, insulted heaven opened and there ensued the melancholy penitential drama "Tear Gas in the Rain," familiar to any all-weather student of the twentieth century's hopes and dreams. The Via Dolorosa became a sad place indeed. Its narrow alleys and their inhabitants were soundly poisoned, and many a mournful wet towel went round that night in the city's hospices and hotels.

"Every religion has," Lucas replied agreeably. His surprise at

seeing Charles in such a seedy, possibly druggy joint piqued his curiosity. From time to time, Lucas had thought of recruiting him as a source. In his more daring moods, he imagined writing up a story the other guys had thus far left unexamined.

There were rumors, as the intifada ran its course, that some of the *shebab* — the young Palestinian activists who collected taxes for the Front in East Jerusalem — had entered into certain financial arrangements with some hoodlums on the Israeli side. It was a story related to the tales one heard about official corruption in the Occupied Territories. Something of the sort had surfaced in Belfast the previous year, involving connivance between some IRA protection squads and the Protestant underground across town.

Documenting any projected piece on such a subject sounded like dangerous work, but it was the kind of story that appealed to Lucas. He liked the ones that exposed depravity and duplicity on both sides of supposedly uncompromising sacred struggles. He found such stories reassuring, an affirmation of the universal human spirit. Lucas desperately preferred almost anything to blood and soil, ancient loyalty, timeless creeds.

Since rashly quitting his comfortable and rather prestigious newspaper job the year before, he had been finding life difficult. It was constantly necessary to explain oneself. His calling cards impressed new acquaintances as somehow incomplete. Sometimes he felt like a dilettante. And as a freelance he had become less thrifty, less disciplined and more ambitious. Without the constraints of the newspaper format, the stories he wrote went on and on — naturally enough, since things tended to, and things knew nothing of formats or of newspapers, and it was only a beautiful pretense that the daily paper's readers could be informed. A noble pretense, honestly and diligently pretended. Still, there were alternatives, as far as a story went. Fortunately, though the whole world attended the place, there continued to be more people in Jerusalem who liked to talk than liked to listen.

"It's hard to get a drink in town these days," he told Charles.

Charles made an unpleasant face and opened a beer for himself. Then he glanced toward the street and quickly touched glasses with Lucas.

"They say there are more drugs in town," Lucas rashly offered. Charles owed Lucas a few minor favors, mainly having to do with the expediting of American visas for his relatives, and they had an

understanding that, within the limits of a strict discretion, Lucas might use Charles as a source.

"Correct," said Charles.

"I thought there might be some surprises there. I thought I might write about it."

Charles gave him a long, dark look and glanced from side to side. "You're wrong."

"I'm wrong?"

"You're wrong. Because you know and I know what everyone knows, so it's not a surprise."

"What's not?"

"One," Charles said, "no surprise. Two, you can't write about it."

"Well . . ." Lucas began.

"You can't. Who you think you are? Who you got behind you?"

It was a question much to the point, Lucas considered.

"Tell me," Charles asked, "do you know Woody Allen?"

"Not personally."

"Woody is a good guy," Charles declared. "On account of that he suffers."

"Is that right?"

"Woody came to Palestine," Charles said, savoring his ice-cold Heineken. "He is himself a Jew. But he saw the occupation and spoke out. He spoke out against the beatings and shootings. So what happened? The American papers slandered him. They took the wife's side."

Lucas affected to ponder the case of Woody Allen.

Charles shrugged with the self-evidentness of it all. "So," he told Lucas, "forget it. Write about Woody."

"Come on," Lucas said. "Woody Allen never came here." The cold beer made his eyebrows ache.

"He did," Charles insisted. "Many saw him."

They let the subject drop.

"Write about *majnoon*," Charles suggested.

"Maybe I will. Can I bring them here?"

"Bring them. Spend money."

"Maybe I'll just go away somewhere for a while," Lucas said, surprising himself with his own confiding impulse.

"I won't be here when you get back," Charles said quietly. "Soon I'm the last Nazareth Habib around. Then, goodbye."