

THE
FAIREST
AMONG
WOMEN

Shifra Horn

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TRANSLATED FROM
THE HEBREW BY *H. Sacks*

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Also by

Shifra Horn

Four Mothers

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In April 1948 a bloody battle for control of West Jerusalem took place between Arab and Israeli armies. The wealthy inhabitants of the Arab neighborhood of Katamon, with its beautiful stone villas, suffered as a result of the fighting. Caught between the two armies, the neighborhood was subjected to a barrage of bullets and shells, and the lives of the residents became intolerable. As the fighting continued to rage, they fled, leaving behind them uneaten meals, unmade beds, and all their possessions, for unknown destinations, with the clothes on their backs and the keys to their houses around their necks, hoping and believing that the war would soon be over and they would be able to return to their homes. The neighborhood was conquered by the Israeli army, and the original residents were never allowed to return to their homes.

When the battle was over the magnificent empty homes were taken over by Jewish refugees from the Jewish Quarter of the Old City, which had been conquered by Jordanian Legionnaires. They were joined by those fleeing from the borderline neighborhood of Mamilla, at the foot of the Old City walls, which was subjected to heavy bombardment and bullets from Jordanian snipers. Broken in body and spirit, Holocaust survivors, who had left behind them in Europe the ashes of their murdered families and their memories, homes, and property, crowded together with Jewish exiles from the Arab countries, who left everything behind them and emigrated to the Promised Land.

In the rooms of the abandoned villas of Katamon these refugee families set about trying to rebuild their ruined lives and to forget the sights of death and war.

This book is dedicated to refugees all over the world, violently uprooted from their lives in the shadow of war.

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tiles where they had been slumbering peacefully for years in the rooms of the affluent villas of Katamon and hauled against their will away on the looters' heels'. Humbly they were dragged through the dust, leaving furrows in the ground as they passed, their brilliant colors blackened with the filth of the streets, the threads woven and tied by the strong, nimble fingers of the young women weavers coming loose. Where the carpets went, who dragged them away, what floor tiles they were covering today, and whose feet were cushioned by their softness—nobody knew the answers to Rosa's questions when she grew up and tried to solve the mystery of the walking carpets.

In years to come, whenever she came across a magnificent carpet in the homes of friends or relations, she would look closely and search for signs of dragging, in case it turned out to be one of the looted carpets that had terrified her with their muffled noise on the night after the Battle of Saint Simon.

The next morning they moved from their narrow room in Mamilla to the new house they had been allocated in Katamon. Its Arab owners had fled in panic and made their way in a sad convoy of cars and loaded wagons that crept along the Hebron Road to an unknown destination. All the way from Mamilla to the abandoned neighborhood of Katamon, little Rosa walked with one hand held tight in her mother's and the other imprisoned in that of her uncle Joseph. The household goods, the mattresses, the quilts, and their clothes and those of the dead Amatzia preceded them on a ramshackle baby carriage made of wood. Rosa remembered the bare back of the porter pushing the baby carriage heaped with the greasy ammunition boxes. The back was broad and glistening with sweat, and the dark hairs growing on the round shoulders stuck to the wet flesh. When they arrived Angela argued over his fee, and he went away cursing and spitting in disappointment.

Splendid villas greeted them in their new neighborhood, and the tense stillness in the air underlined the chirping of the birds hiding between the boughs of the mulberry trees, palm fronds, and pine needles as if they were afraid of being hit by a stray bullet. The house that had been assigned to them and that, together with its inhabitants, was to decide Rosa's fate and set her life on its predetermined course, was built of chiseled pink stones veined with red. Tall, narrow windows, framed in jutting stones, looked at them curiously under arched eyebrows and half-lowered blue blinds. Rosa raised her eyes and saw

the rusty remains of the rain dripping from an iron gutter projecting from the corner and gaping at her like the beak of an ancient bird. The downspout climbed up the wall of the house to an ungainly roof covered with orange tiles, which reminded her of a fez. The iron gate, shaped like a potbellied treble clef, opened wide with Oriental hospitality and greeted them with a merry squeak that broke the tense silence. A vast hall, stripped of carpets and furniture, welcomed them in; and a fresh smell of lavender mixed with the sweet scent of the jasmine twining round the window bars, designed by the music-loving owner of the house to look like musical notes, assailed Rosa's nostrils. Like a trespasser on somebody else's property, afraid that the rightful owners would emerge to chase them away in disgrace, Angela took Rosa's hand, pressed it tightly to her bosom, leaving white pressure marks on her palm, and set out with her to explore the deserted rooms on either side of the hall.

In the kitchen they found a cold meal set on a spotless damask cloth, covering a magnificent mahogany table that appeared to be crouching in the corner on legs carved to resemble lions' paws. Rosa felt the pitas and marveled at their unexpected hardness, gazed at the black olives gleaming seductively in their bath of green oil, examined the soft white goats' cheese called *labneh*, whose sour smell pervaded the house, and tried to breathe in the aroma of the black kebabs threaded on little skewers, around which a swarm of glittering flies was buzzing. She longed to break off a piece of pita and dip it in the *labneh*, but Angela's bony hand shot out and slapped Rosa's dimpled little one. The insulted child withdrew her hand from the tempting food and burst into the frustrated screams of a hungry little girl whose food has been snatched from her mouth.

"It's not ours," Angela explained. "It's not our food."

"So whose food is it?" she asked when she calmed down. Although her mother usually took care to answer all her questions, this time she did not bother to reply.

Like someone rudely shaken out of her sleep in the middle of the night, Angela walked around the house in the wake of the man in uniform who had been waiting to meet them. She pointed to the room she wanted and asked for it in a weak voice. Rosa was surprised at her choice. The room was full of excrement, and there was a strong smell of urine in the air. After scrubbing the floor and scattering Amatzia's possessions about the room, Angela tried to put Rosa to sleep in

a new-looking wooden bed she had dragged in from the adjacent room. Rosa looked suspiciously at the bed, on which plump little angels were painted in soft pastel colors, and sat down on it hesitantly. With a weary movement of her hand Angela motioned her to lie down, and she curled up obediently and sank into the soft mattress. But just as she was falling asleep she suddenly sprang up as if she had done something wrong.

"Whose bed is this?" she asked.

"It's yours now," Angela answered in a confidential whisper.

"But someone slept in it before. Another little girl slept in it; where is she now?"

"The little girl went away, and now it's yours," said Angela.

"Then the bed isn't mine, and I'm not allowed to sleep in it," said Rosa firmly, remembering the *pita* and *labneh*.

"If you don't want to sleep on it you can sleep on the floor," her mother answered crossly.

Worn out, Rosa sprawled out on the new bed, thinking of the sounds she had heard the night before, of the little princess on whose bed she was sleeping, and of the painted cherubs playing her to sleep on their harps. With sweet sounds in her ears and images of golden-haired princesses dancing in front of her, Rosa closed her eyes and fell asleep. The mattress, which still held the warmth and the smell of that other little girl, who had gone, never to return, who had wet its kapok with her tears when she was sad and dreamed sweet dreams in its depths, quietly and submissively embraced the heavy body of the new little girl who had found a refuge in it.

That night Rosa met her. She was a little girl of her own age wearing a ruffled white dress, with airy lace gloves as white as snow on her hands and spotless white socks and patent leather shoes on her feet. Around her neck hung a big, heavy iron key, tied to a white silk ribbon and dangling against her chest like a precious locket. If she hadn't been so short, Rosa would have taken her for a bride. She looked at the girl in alarm and realized that she was looking at her own image, as if she were looking at herself in a mirror. The two little girls stared wide-eyed at each other.

Rosa dared to break the heavy silence. "Who are you?"

"Who are you?" the little girl answered like an echo.

"I asked first. Who are you?"

"You're sleeping in my bed," the strange little girl said in a quiet

voice, her face as expressionless as if the angel bed had not been stolen from her.

"It's mine now. My mother said so," Rosa retorted, holding on to the wooden railing firmly, as if the mattress were about to slip out from under her body.

"But before it was mine," said the stranger quietly, afraid to wake Angela and Joseph, sleeping soundly on their bedding on the floor.

Rosa knew that the little girl was right, and she held her tongue because she didn't know what to say. Then she gathered the courage to ask, "What's your name? Mine's Rosa."

With inexplicable obstinacy the stranger refused to reveal her name, and Rosa decided for her: "If you don't want to tell me your name, I'll call you Rina," she announced, happy to give her a name of which she was particularly fond at the time.

The strange little girl rolled the name round in her mouth like a ball: "Ri, Rin, Rina," and with lackluster eyes accepted her new name.

"What's that key?" Rosa asked, and weighed the key in her hand.

"It's the key to my house," she replied, hesitating.

"And where is your house?" asked Rosa, even though she knew the answer.

The little girl didn't answer, as if she hadn't heard the question.

"So where are you sleeping now?" asked Rosa. "My mother told me today that you're sleeping in the bed of another little girl who went away."

Rina was silent. With her snow white hand she signaled to Rosa to make room for her. Rosa turned down the blanket, and to her astonishment the little girl got into bed with her clothes, her gloves, and her shoes on. Rina laid her head with its halo of curls on the plump pillow next to Rosa's, and in a tone of command said to her: "Now we have to go to sleep." Rosa snuggled up to her obediently and fell asleep.

When she woke up in the morning the little girl was gone. In her place she found a huge doll with a hard china face and a soft body, cheeks painted pink, blue glass eyes, and a magnificent tower of yellow curls tied with a red silk ribbon. The doll wore a white ruffled dress, and on its feet were soft kidskin sandals. Rosa looked in horror at the doll's dead eyes, which looked back at her with an accusing expression, and pushed it away with a cry. The doll fell onto the tiles, which were decorated with pictures of leaves and fruit, and its hollow skull

hit the floor with a dull thud. By some miracle, the doll's head remained intact.

"What's wrong?" Angela rushed up to her, picked the unwanted doll up from the floor, and examined its head for cracks. "Look what a beautiful new doll you've got," she said, trying to infect Rosa with her enthusiasm.

"It's not my doll," the little girl answered accusingly.

"It's yours now," said Angela and put the doll back on the bed. Rosa shrank into herself, trying not to touch the lifeless body lying beside her and staring at her with cold glass eyes. She tried to tell Angela about Rina, but her mother, who was busy arranging the room and unpacking the boxes, only pretended to be listening, nodding in agreement, and Rosa knew that she hadn't heard a word. Later on she overheard her mother saying to Joseph: "If we hadn't moved into this house they would probably have slaughtered us, like they did my poor husband, Amatzia, and it's lucky for us the army arrived to save the town, and in any case they're living in our houses now and sleeping in our beds and wearing our clothes and eating our food, and we're doing to them exactly what they're doing to us." Rosa, who didn't understand what she meant, asked her uncle Joseph, but he refused to elaborate on his sister's words, and afterward she heard him scolding Angela for planting unnecessary fears in the child's heart.

The next night, before she got into bed, Rosa put the rejected doll into an ammunition box she had found in the yard and padded it with an old towel. She placed the box with the doll inside it next to her bed. "This is your bed," she said to the doll. "You're not allowed to get into my bed." That night Rina visited her again. She was glad to see the doll and told Rosa that her name was Belle, because she was the most beautiful doll of all. She picked the doll up carefully—"because her face is made of china and it can break"—and showed Rosa how to turn it over so that it said in a high, piping voice: "Mama, mama, mama." Then she asked her to take good care of the doll and keep her dresses clean and showed her how to look after Belle's hair.

After that Rina appeared every night and lay down beside her, and she became her best friend—until the day that Rachele, Ruhama, and Ruth, her new friends, arrived in the house. Rina, her night friend, couldn't take part in their daytime games—jump rope, catch,

and hide-and-seek—and their friendship cooled off a little. She would reappear mainly on lonely nights when the icy winter wind played whistling tunes on the musical notes of the window bars. Then she would stand pale faced next to the bed, ask about the doll, Belle, and Rosa would invite her into their bed, calm her fears of the thunderbolts and lightning flashes, and explain to her that they were not gunfire or shells, because the war was over long ago. And when Rina calmed down, Rosa would tell her in a whisper that the whole world was full of little girls sleeping in the beds of other little girls who were sleeping in the beds of other little girls, and that there was no end to it, because this was the way things had to be.

A few days after they had moved into the splendid villa, which boasted the name “Ali Hamouda’s House of Notes” and was registered in the government offices as “Abandoned property, block 142, house number 5,” they were joined by refugee families who had escaped from the Jewish Quarter of the Old City, whose eyes still reflected the terrifying sight of the Jordanian Legionnaires surrounding them on all sides and whose ears echoed with the thunder of the shells. Tattered clothes, diapers gray with washing, and sheets stained with blood and excrement were hung out in front of the house, over the lavender bushes, hiding the splendid entrance from the eyes of passersby. The air grew dense with cigarette smoke, and the odor of sweat mingled with the sweetness of cheap perfume, the reek of menstruating women, babies’ shit, salted herring, garlic, cabbage soup. All these plus the bad breath of rotting teeth and smells of mold and rust suddenly filled the house, rudely thrusting aside the delicate scents of lavender and jasmine that had greeted Angela, Rosa, and Joseph when they first arrived.

It was then that Rosa began to notice the patches of lighter color on the walls, hinting at pictures that had been torn from their place by an anonymous hand; the marks left by the scraping of heavy furniture on the tiles, furniture that had disappeared together with the rolled-up carpets; and the piles of books in fine covers that had been pushed into a corner and served the refugee families as fuel or as toilet paper. At night she would hear the screams of Mischa, whose arm was tattooed with a row of five blue numbers; the shrill cries of the many babies crowded into the rooms; and the groans coming from the writhing bodies of Mr. and Mrs. Cohen, whose little cubbyhole was separated from Angela’s room by a gray army blanket.

There were five families living in the house. The Cohens had received the dressing room, a little cubbyhole leading off Angela's room, which was the best bedroom in the house.

In days to come, when strife and contention increased in the house, Rosa would hear her mother explaining to the other residents that she was entitled to the best room because her husband had been killed by an Arab murderer and she had a fatherless child to look after, as well as a brother who was also an orphan.

Mischa occupied the kitchen, and whenever anybody needed a drink of water in the middle of the night he would wake from his troubled sleep, sit up in his rumpled bed clad in striped pajamas sour with sweat, and rub his eyes with his ruined hands. At the sight of a ghostly figure wandering round the kitchen he would break into a series of screams in Polish. Until they took pity on him and requested all the residents to keep a supply of drinking water in their rooms in order not to disturb his rest, because his penetrating screams in the dead of night woke not only the inhabitants of their own house but also the people living in the villas next door to it.

The entrance hall, previously the grand salon of the house, was occupied by the Warshavsky family from the conquered Jewish Quarter. A black-clad and long-bearded father, a mother so brittle and angular that it seemed her body would snap in half at a touch, and six small children crowded into the room, sleeping on mattresses on the floor. At night the mattresses covered the floor, and by day they were stacked in the corner in a colorful heap the children liked to clamber up and dive off, straight onto the hard floor. The oldest child was Ruhama, who was Rosa's age, as skinny as her mother, pale and fair-haired. Ruhama, whom everyone called "the shrew," would secretly pinch the bottoms of her one-year-old twin brothers whenever her mother asked her to change their diapers, and she would tell Rosa forbidden things about husbands and wives and what they did to each other at night. The spacious, windowless room smelled permanently of wet diapers.

The Zilka family, consisting of five people, lived in the room opposite Angela's. The father of the family, who in Iraq had been a man of means, an accountant who always dressed in suits, now had a job as a construction worker. Every evening he would sit in the entrance to the house next to the lavender bushes, rolling amber worry beads between his fingers, drowning his misery in arak, and cursing

the day he had decided to emigrate to Israel with his family. After that he would try to approach his wife, and she would yell at him that his breath stank and that she would only allow him to touch her when he got rid of the disgusting smell.

Their daughter, Rachelle, boasted long, thick black hair that looked as smooth and shiny as if she ironed it every morning with a coal iron. Her flat nose and pitted skin, humped and cratered by the ravages of smallpox, detracted only slightly from the glory of her hair. Her brown, almond-shaped eyes turned purple when she was angry, and she was never short of reasons for anger. Rachelle was known for her hard character, her forthright common sense, and her need always to be right. Nobody in the house would ever forget her endless arguments with the sharp-tongued Ruhama, with one saying, "That isn't so," and the other saying, "It is so," and continuing *ad infinitum* with, "No, it isn't," and, "Yes, it is." This bickering would only stop when the irate residents screamed at them both to shut up.

The Sharabis—father, mother, grandmother, and the little girl, Ruthie—were the last family to move into the villa, and they received the little room at the end of the hall. Ruthie, whose complexion was *café au lait* and whose glittering emerald eyes shone at night like a cat's, joined Rosa, Ruhama, and Rachelle in their games. When they jumped rope the serious, responsible Ruthie would keep watch on her tiny grandmother, who sat on a low stool at the entrance to the house, a pointed black hood tied over her head and her fragile legs wrapped in shiny trousers trimmed at the edges with a strip of embroidery. People said that she was a hundred years old, and attributed her longevity to her diet, which consisted morning, noon, and evening of *fenu*greek and *ghat*. With the obstinacy of the old she would use her gums to chew the intoxicating leaves she crammed into her toothless mouth. When she had drained the gum-darkening juice to the last drop, she would spit out the blood-colored dregs in an energetic sideways spit that would have put a far younger person to shame.

And when the children were bored, Joseph, the oldest child, would gather them around him and keep them occupied. Once they stole, at his command, a ladder made of rough whitewash-spattered planks, and with its help invaded the wide storage space over the kitchen ceiling, which was high enough to walk upright in. Quietly, so as not to wake the snoring Mischa napping in his fortified kitchen,

they took out china plates and dishes with lacy edges, of whose existence nobody was aware but them, and ran with their booty to the open field. There they formed a line and, one after another, in exemplary order, at Joseph's command, they hurled the china at the gray rocks, gold-rimmed plates, soup bowls, heavy crystal glasses, coffee cups decorated with flowers, gravy boats, and delicate vases made of colored glass. And when they went away they left behind them a pile of broken china mixed with shards of glass and crystal sparkling like diamonds in the sunshine.

When the stock of china and glass ran out, Joseph discovered the movie theaters in the town. He took advantage of his sister Angela's preoccupation with her daily worries, played hooky from school, and made the rounds of the movie theaters. He would go in in the middle of the movie and pay the price of half a ticket. At the end of the movie, before the lights went on in the hall, he would run to the toilet and hide there, standing on the seat so that his feet wouldn't give him away. And when the lights went out he would sneak back in and see the first half of the movie he had missed.

Later on he found himself jobs. At the Edison Cinema he sold waffles, at the Ron he pasted up posters, at the Zion he acted as an usher, and at the Orion he swept the hall. In this way he was able to see a number of movies a day and all the movies showing in town. And when he came home to change his clothes and eat, Rosa would sit beside him, and he would tell her the plots of the movies he'd seen and hum the tunes to her. Angela would pretend to be busy with the housework and listen in secret; and her memories would ferment in her body, her longings for Amatzia would make her heart contract, and her eyes would fill with tears.

After about a year, Angela began repeating to anyone willing to listen that the house was falling apart. The creeping disintegration started in the garden, lapping with its dry tongue at the green plants. When it had finished with the plants it climbed up the downspout and ravaged the roof, after which it slid straight through the windows, invaded the rooms, and finally seeped into the walls themselves, crumbling them and destroying the water pipes and electric wiring. The first one to notice the changes in the garden was Rosa. The lavender bushes and jasmine that had previously surrounded the villa disappeared into thin air, taking with them in silent protest the scent of their flowers. Soon the garden was taken over by hostile nettles, stub-

born couch grass, and thorns. Tall prickly brambles provided shelter for snakes and black scorpions that emerged on the hot summer nights and invaded the rooms in quest of the coolness provided by the thick walls of the house.

Responsibility for the drainpipe, which had come loose from the wall, was taken by Mousa Zilka, Rachelle's brother, who liked climbing up it to the roof. In the summer its dry beak gaped with the helplessness of a dying man, and the painful gurgles it made in winter, when whistling winds banged it cruelly against the wall, made the residents' flesh creep. The iron shutters, attached to the walls by little metal soldiers wearing fezzes on their heads, got stuck, and the stones around them grew rusty. When the shutters were removed, the windows were shattered one after another by the wild ball games of the Warshavsky and Zilka children. After that the tiles began falling from the roof; the water came out of the taps muddy and rusty, making loud, spluttering noises as it did so; the toilet overflowed, wetting their shoes and overpowering the medley of smells in the house with its pungent odor; and at exactly the same time the musical gate at the front of the house was torn from its hinges, leaving a mute, gaping hole behind it, like an open wound exposed to the ravages of the wind. The high ceilings of the house began to sprout black rosebeds of mold, and mossy green growths spread their spores through the air and gave Mischa asthma attacks that sounded like the barking of hungry dogs and kept the other residents awake at night.

At the same time the invasions from outside increased. Long columns of black ants with menacing pincers carried away the herring tails left over by the Warshavsky family and the pita crumbs the Zilka children dropped on the floor. Due to the large amounts of food consumed in the crowded house, gangs of famished gray field mice appeared and built their nests of gnawed rags deep in the recesses of the closets. In their wake came mangy, flea-bitten cats, who stalked the rooms in search of the rodents as if the house belonged to them. Quite independently bands of little pink geckos joined the pilgrimage to this Mecca of houses, the rapid beating of their hearts exposed to view behind the transparent skin of their bellies. Making shrill little chirping noises, the geckos would set out on nocturnal hunts for the glittering green flies swarming round the ceilings and leaving tiny black droppings behind them. Skinny spiders with long, trembling legs arrived on the heels of the flies and began diligently weaving their

beautiful, sinister webs in the corners of the rooms, waiting patiently to trap the flies and methodically covering the ceilings and walls with the artistry of their delicate, closely woven nets.

Rosa would often hear her mother lamenting her bitter fate and complaining of the crowded living conditions that made her life so difficult. One day she heard from Mousa Zilka, with whom she cuddled and kissed in hidden corners of the house until Joseph caught them at it and beat them soundly, about a family who lived in a building not far away and who had had a great stroke of luck. The father of the family had simply wanted to hammer a nail into the wall, and to his astonishment he had discovered a treasure trove of gold coins and jewels. They had sold the lot and bought a new apartment in the nice Jewish neighborhood of Rehavia, where they now lived all by themselves.

While everyone was discussing the treasure trove with glittering eyes, Rosa equipped herself with a long, rusty nail, and late at night, after her mother's sighs turned to light snores, she called Rina and consulted her. Rina joined her in their bed in her ruffled dress and her patent leather shoes, which she never took off and which never wore out. She listened gravely to the story and admitted that there was a treasure trove in the house, but she refused to reveal where it was hidden. "I don't need your favors," said Rosa, and began gently tapping on the wall next to the bed and listening intently to the sounds it made. After choosing a place that sounded particularly dull and hollow and was well hidden behind the pink frame of the angel bed, she began digging into it with the nail. When she had done for the night she stuck the nail deep into the kapok mattress, until only its flat head showed. The next night she groped for the cold tip of the nail, pulled it out, tapped it on the wall, listened to the dull noises it made, and continued her digging. She did this every night, searching for the treasure hidden by the previous occupants of the house before they fled. Angela, who cleaned the room every day, was at a loss to understand where the little heaps of plaster and whitewash under Rosa's bed came from.

"This house is falling apart," Rosa heard her complaining to Mrs. Zilka. "Wherever I go I find sand and whitewash and bits of plaster."

"I have the same problem. The house is full of sand, and I can't understand where it comes from."

"However much you clean it keeps on coming back." The