

Chapter 2

In the village, they call me “Uzik the troublemaker” because of the things I do, which they call “pranks,” and when the village rabbi wants to console Aunt Miriam, he calls them “a bit of mischief,” as if a different name could change what it means. My pranks, I explain to Zionka, aren’t dangerous to anyone and have never yet caused anybody to run away from Palestine.

I think everyone around me is too serious. They work from sunrise to sunset in the cow sheds, in the citrus groves and with the beehives, and they never leave their small stores, even on the hottest days. When we celebrate a special occasion in the village, like a wedding, they cry on the bride’s shoulder, trot out all the troubles they’ve had in the past, and recall all the dead people who martyred themselves for some cause or other. Especially Aunt Miriam, who keeps her feet propped up on a footstool the whole evening, sighing, “Life is hard.”

So, I look for ways to be happy. Most of all, I want to make myself laugh, and sometimes, I think that only a prank can prove I exist.

Aharonchik, the baker, who is the most ardent communist in all the villages in Samariya, calls me “Uzik Mujik.” I asked around about the word “mujik,”

and when I heard it means “farmer” in Russian, I thought it was a perfect nickname for someone who lives in an agricultural village and makes his living keeping bees. It even sounded to me like a compliment. Then, I found out that the Russian word has another meaning—“ignoramus”—and that sounded pretty insulting to me. Like the “analphabet” Zionka’s mother and Mali Perlmutter, the watchmaker’s wife, shout at me. Every time I’m in the bakery, I try to figure out from Aharonchik’s voice whether he says “Mujik” out of affection, or whether he means to hurt me, and that’s not easy to do, because a person’s voice sometimes sounds one way, and sometimes another.

The simplest things in Aharonchik’s place, “Half a bread” or “Two Sabbath challahs” sound like a speech. After he finishes off three vodkas, he starts calling me *tovarish*—“friend” in Russian—and when he begins singing about great Mother Russia, I wait for him to call me an “anarchist.”

Even if Aharonchik planned to announce to the entire world that I was an illiterate ignoramus, I couldn’t argue with him, because it was true. I still hadn’t learned how to read, and my teachers had given up on me. When they wrote on the board, the only thing I could do was listen to the squeaking of the chalk, and the letters looked to me like scared insects. I would look at the other kids’ bent heads and my eyes would immediately fall on Zionka’s golden hair. They’d all be writing away, and I didn’t understand what I was doing there and why I wasn’t outside. I once tried to copy from the board, but when I looked away for only a second, I couldn’t find the

word again. The letters had just disappeared.

A long time ago, I asked Aharonchik what the word “anarchist” means. He grinned from ear to ear and even gave me a fresh roll, hot from the oven. “A lawbreaker. Someone who doesn’t accept the rules and lives in complete freedom,” he said, and that was the biggest compliment I ever got in my life.

I don’t even have any notebooks, just books that I never open, and it’s only out of “the goodness of her heart,” as my teacher said, that I am tested orally. Every year, they threaten to keep me down, but I manage to pass the tests at the last minute.

They say, “Nothing will ever come of him, the poor orphan, a wild, neglected little devil.” They don’t even bother to whisper or talk behind my back, as if I were deaf too, and everyone admires Aunt Miriam for agreeing to look after me and taking on such a heavy burden.

She says, “An obligation is an obligation” and “Blood is thicker than water,” a smug expression spreading across her face. The village rabbi comes to visit us once a week, drinks tea in the china cups with the flower design that Aunt Miriam takes out of the sideboard especially for him, and listens patiently to all her troubles. He compliments her when he arrives, “Who can find a woman of valor,” and before he leaves, he puts his hand on my wild hair and says, “A blessing on your head. The Almighty, blessed be His name, is a great prankster, like you,” and then he kisses the mezuzah.

Only two people in the entire village—the rabbi and the principal—call me by my real name, Uziel, the name

my father gave me the day I was born. To this day, Imri claims he chose the name, but I don't believe him.

I once heard Zionka's mother warn her not to be my friend, because I'm a pest and bigger troublemaker than the British, and that was a real insult, because the English rule Palestine and don't allow us to call it our homeland. Even Mohammed Daudi hates them, and he says, "With God's help, one day they'll leave here with their tail between their legs."

But I actually secretly admire their spick-and-span uniforms and pilots' hats, but can't say so openly. Whenever they practice marching in formation with their hobnailed shoes clacking rhythmically, and they come close to our land where the beehives are, I untie Johnny Weissmuller, my dog, to scare them. But even if they are scared, it's hard to tell. They go right on marching in perfect step, maybe because the pilot observing them, an officer with light-colored hair and a neatly trimmed mustache, is more of a threat to them than my dog.

I didn't play any serious pranks all those months that Imri was away from home. Except for the time I jumped through the window of the village committee house, disrupting a lecture being given by one of the leaders of the Jewish community on the situation in the country. I fell inside at exactly the moment he was talking about Lord Passfield's White Paper, a document that stated how many new immigrants were allowed to come to Palestine and that no one could come near it without a paper known as a "certificate." Papers were my enemy, I explained to Zionka. Especially what was written on them. I don't see the words, only the white

spaces between them, and sometimes, I try to read them instead of the black marks.

I landed exactly when they were arguing about whether the letter sent by the English Prime Minister, McDonald, to Chaim Weizmann would remedy the situation. Aharonchik the baker argued fervently that it was just another English swindle. The lecturer, an important person who had come especially from Tel Aviv, smiled at me as I landed on his table, and proclaimed, “Here’s a sign from heaven! This is the child for whose sake we are struggling,” and while I was still trying to get down off the table, I said to the audience that I was not willing to be anything for the sake of anybody. My teacher, who was also present, suggested sending me as a gift to the English in exchange for a few new immigrants.

And there was one more small prank. I sent Johnny Weissmuller to chase the ducks in Zionka’s yard. I was lucky that Zionka burst out laughing when she heard the chorus of quacking and didn’t snitch on me to her mother, who would’ve sent me straight to Aunt Miriam, because Zionka’s mother thought I was a hopeless case. But Zionka’s father actually liked me, and every weekend, when he came home from paving roads, he wanted to know what pranks he’d missed, and he would burst out laughing and say, “This is the new generation of Jews that aren’t afraid of anything.” The words didn’t comfort me, because Zionka’s father didn’t have the slightest idea what I really was afraid of.

I followed Imri’s instructions, and I did all the jobs Aunt Miriam assigned me. Mohammed and I harvested the

honey, and he didn't let me do too much licking. He said we have to leave room on our tongue for the taste of onions too.

Aunt Miriam continued to complain that the burden—namely, me—was pushing her poor shoulders down to the ground, and what a tragedy had befallen her when my parents were taken and she was left with the responsibility, and who knows what was in store for all of us in this crazy country. I sometimes thought she was mad at my father because his heart suddenly stopped beating without any warning, and I think to myself, the poor man, why does he have to be blamed for dying? Aunt Miriam never had any complaints about my mother, and maybe that's because my aunt loved her younger sister very much, and didn't actually believe she was dead. Every day, she talked to her in the empty air, usually when her hands were busy shining the Sabbath candlesticks. She reported to her on how many centimeters I'd grown, she lied about my progress in reading, and she also told her how many new immigrants over the quota had sneaked into the country, right under the nose of the English. Everything Aunt Miriam told my mother sounded better than it was in reality, maybe so the woman in the air wouldn't worry and think the situation had gotten worse since she left us.

Sometimes Aunt Miriam would take a break between the things she was saying, as if she were listening to replies. She'd be so quiet and absorbed that I was sure my mother was answering her. I tried to talk to my mother in the air too, but for me, the air always stayed empty.

The morning after Imri left. Aunt Miriam devoted

most of her conversation with my mother to a detailed description of her older son's important mission, finishing up with the sentence that always ended those conversations, "I hope you are well where you are." Then Aunt Miriam put the shining candlesticks back on the shelf that held all our religious objects. The rabbi always marveled at the "heavenly glow" that came from them.

I didn't know how long Imri would stay away. Did getting married take a long or a short time? And maybe he'd want to stay in Europe, which was so beautiful and peaceful. I hoped he'd come back. Aunt Miriam had no doubt that he would, but I wasn't completely sure.

Time is something I think about a lot, especially since the day I went to the movies.

Chapter 3

Four months passed. I didn't know if that was considered a long or a short time. For me, it was an endless period of time, cut into slices of ordinary events of the kind we don't pay attention to. We received one postcard, and aunt Miriam read it out loud. Imri told us not to worry about him, described the gorgeous European countryside, and said how sorry he was that he didn't have a camera to immortalize everything. He didn't mention the new bride. The back of the postcard showed the watercolor drawing of a small village, something like our own village, except that white snow covered the slanted roofs of the houses, and there was a cross at the top of the church.

There had already been a succession of three or four queens in our hives, and only the taste of the honey stayed the same. Mohammed Daudi went all the way to Gaza with his hives for the nectar from the cactus flowers, and had already returned. New chicks had hatched from the eggs in the hen house, and the ducks in Zionka's yard had already learned to swim in the washtub. It is impossible to skip over even the smallest things. What happens is what's supposed to happen, the rabbi says, but I don't agree with him. If he's really the

blessed Almighty's representative on earth, why doesn't he have a few words with his boss and explain to Him that it's all so boring if we know everything beforehand. In one of her daily conversations with my mother in the air, Aunt Miriam told her that Imri and his bride would be coming home soon.

I was surprised. Why should the bride come back home with Imri? Aunt Miriam told me specifically that she wasn't a real bride. Imri didn't even know his new wife, that's what I told Zionka. Like a true expert, I said, "You see, Zionka, they made them a couple only to trick the English. It's a 'fictitious' marriage, Zionka. That's a word you have to remember, 'fictitious.' You don't have to know how to write it." And I also told her—word for word from the mouth of Aharonchik the baker, "The reason our best boys volunteer to marry Jewish girls they don't know in Europe is to have their names entered in their passports as their legal wives, and to avoid having to get a 'certificate,' without which, you can't get near this country." It all sounded like the kind of really clever prank I'd love to take part in.

Zionka was less enthusiastic than I was. She shrugged and said, "I wouldn't agree to marry just any boy who all of a sudden arrived from Palestine. That bride probably didn't even know the difference between the Eretz Israel in books and the real Palestine here."

Then I told her what I'd told my teacher, "You don't understand, Zionka. It's all for the sake of the homeland."

One of the ducks quacked, as if backing up what I had said. It was the duck we later called "the Zionist duck," because it loved to peck at the picture of Herzl,

especially that sentence I don't know how to read, but can say perfectly, "If you will, it is no fairy-tale."

And I even boasted to Zionka, "When I grow up, I'll volunteer too. I'll even agree to get married a hundred times, until we have our own country." But I only said that to impress her because, for Zionka, the homeland is no joke.

She said, "You know, Uzik, that woman will be your sister-in-law."

I rolled the new word around on my tongue and said, "I never had a sister-in-law."

Zionka warned me, "Be careful of her. Even a 'fictitious' sister-in-law can be a witch, like the stepmother in fairytales who throws the child out of the house." But somehow, I wasn't scared.

Aunt Miriam told my mother in the air that Imri was bringing his wife to live with us until she found her relatives. And just so my mother wouldn't worry, she added that, in the meantime, while Imri was staying in the country, the village rabbi would arrange a quick divorce, and then Imri could go back to Europe and marry a second bride. Aunt Miriam added, "You see, my sister, everything is under control."

It sounded complicated. Getting married "fictitiously," getting divorced "fictitiously." I thought it was a much more serious prank than any of mine, but it seemed that everything was allowed when it came to the homeland. Aunt Miriam assured my mother in the air that none of this was being done behind the rabbi's back. He was part of it. Aunt Miriam explained everything very seriously, and it was hard for me to understand how dead people

could understand anything so complicated, because I don't believe there's a homeland in heaven.

I'm not sure I'm too crazy about the idea of a strange woman suddenly coming to live with us. If they tell me to leave my room, I won't do it. Everything is exactly where I want it to be, even if Aunt Miriam claims my room is a total mess, and even the blessed Almighty couldn't find His way in it. I don't like changes, I don't want to change, even though Zionka's mother thinks that's exactly what I need. I hope that Polish woman is a short-term guest.

Aunt Miriam said to the rabbi, "So, all right, another burden to bear, but I'm used to it already."

Aunt Miriam didn't close her mouth, making the room spin from so many words and china cups. She promised the rabbi she would do everything to help the poor girl until she could manage by herself in the country. A new immigrant with delicate hands who would complain about the heat and the mosquitoes and how hard it was to find a job. We'd have to explain to her that here, you have to work at all kinds of different jobs, and women even go out to work in the quarry, or go from house to house selling "laundry bluing" in small tin boxes. "We don't have any time here for idleness or recreation," Aunt Miriam proclaimed, as if recreation were a dangerous disease, and she bragged so much about our wonderful Imri, the precious son of the entire village, who was sacrificing his passport on the altar of the nation. He had promised the Jewish Agency to marry at least four women for them. She never called *him* a "burden."

The rabbi swallowed the hot tea in one gulp, as if the pale brew had suddenly been struck by frost, and said,

“They shall come to this land no matter how much the English, may their names be cursed, rant and rave,” and for a minute, he reminded me of Mohammed Daudi.