
Opening Extract from...

The Betrayers

Written by David Bezmozgis

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The Betrayers

A NOVEL

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To Mae, Lena, and Eve

And when Hadad heard in Egypt that David slept with his fathers, and that Joab the captain of the host was dead, Hadad said to Pharaoh: "Let me depart, that I may go to mine own country." Then Pharaoh said unto him: "But what hast thou lacked with me, that, behold, thou seekest to go to thine own country?" And he answered: "Nothing; howbeit let me depart in any wise."

—First Kings 11:21–22

There can be no struggle for national liberation without sacrifices and repression, death in battle and the execution of martyrs. And nothing on earth can withstand the power of self-sacrifice.

—David Raziel

Sanctuary

ONE

A thousand kilometers away, while the next great drama of his life was unfolding and God was banging His gavel to shake the Judaean hills, Baruch Kotler sat in the lobby of a Yalta hotel and watched his young mistress berate the hotel clerk—a pretty blond girl, who endured the assault with a stiff, mulish expression. A particularly Russian sort of expression, Kotler thought. The morose, disdainful expression with which the Russians had greeted their various invaders. An expression that denoted an irrational, mortal refusal to capitulate—the pride and bane of the Russian people. That Leora persisted in arguing with the girl proved that she was the product of another culture. In Israel, notoriously obstinate country, argument could be sport, sometimes engaged in for its own sake, sometimes to accomplish something. But this Levantine penchant for argument was of no use in a Crimean hotel at high season. Much had changed, Kotler observed—the very existence of this modern hotel and a few others like it; the vacationers in their Western fashions and their brash, contemptuous, cheerful, money-

induced postures; all the visible appurtenances of progress and prosperity—but at the root, where it mattered, there was no change. One had only to look at the Russian girl's face. A people's mentality, this hard nut, mysterious and primitive, resisted change. Yet to espouse such a view was now considered provocative, and it was precisely this sort of provocative thinking that had landed him in his predicament, Kotler thought gravely—but not without a twist of ironic satisfaction.

Leora spun away from the registration desk and strode over to Kotler. He regarded her as she approached, a strong-minded Jewish girl, dark curls flying, black eyes fierce with indignation, her solid, compact figure radiating rebuke. Perhaps someone could think, considering them, that here was a dutiful daughter vacationing with her father. But wasn't that yet another of the changes, the increased number of daughters and fathers who seemed to be vacationing together?

—The cow says they have no record of our reservation, Leora announced. An outright lie. I was tempted to tell her whom she was dealing with.

—I'm sure it would have made a profound impression.

—I wouldn't be so dismissive of your importance.

—Well, there's something I've seldom been accused of, Kotler said.

—I don't find this nearly as amusing as you do.

—All right, Leora, what do you propose we do? Write an open letter, stage a hunger strike?

Each trailing a suitcase, they stepped from the coolness of the marble lobby into the bright glare of the esplanade. In his disguise of white Borsalino hat and dark sunglasses, Kotler blinked out at the tourists who flowed past, the waiters who raced

among tables at a café nearby, and the customers who beset the souvenir booths along the stone wall. Beyond which: the sea and the sunbathers on the gray pebble beach. So how much had really changed? Kotler thought. Fifty-three years ago, had the picture been so very different? There'd been no modern hotels, and the offerings at the cafés and souvenir booths hadn't been quite so eclectic, but there had still been plenty to enchant a ten-year-old boy. Kotler recalled the open-air concerts, the hikes with his father in the surrounding hills, the excursions to the Greek ruins and the Italian fortress, and the long, aimless, scorching days at the beach. They had spent an entire month this way, he and his parents, their only such time together. In the scheme of his family's story, this one month assumed a legendary, halcyon quality. They never succeeded in repeating it. The following summer, his mother had a terrible appendicitis scare. The summer after that, his father switched jobs. And after that, Kotler's vaunted musical aspirations interceded. His parents agreed that he shouldn't spend so much time away from his piano lessons. The great Myron Leventhal consented to take him on, and Kotler traveled for the first time to Moscow. And after that, it was too late. There was always something else he preferred to do. When he wasn't preoccupied with his studies, he was preoccupied with friends, with girls, and eventually with politics. In retrospect, given the way their lives unfolded, what a shame it was that they never managed to return to Crimea.

Kotler and Leora paused outside the hotel to adjust to their surroundings and circumstances. Leora gazed at the neighboring hotels.

—There's no point, Kotler said, following her gaze. When I called yesterday, they told me I was getting their last room. It's

August. The town is booked up. Everywhere here we'll get the same answer.

He read in Leora's eyes a tempered defiance and disappointment. Tempered, he understood, out of respect and—it couldn't be denied—concern for him.

—Maybe. But it would take ten minutes to find out.

—I'd sooner not waste the time.

—So what, then? Is that it? Do we just fly back?

—No, we've come this far. It would be senseless to leave.

—Wonderful, Baruch. But where will we stay? In a tent on the beach? Like the nudists in Koktebel?

—There's an idea. I can see the headline and the photo: Baruch Kotler Exposed!

—Yes, and where am I in this photo?

—Beside me. Where else? If this is the way it's going to be, let them gape.

—I feel I've seen enough of those photos.

—Never mind that, Kotler said. Anyhow, we haven't moved in with the nudists just yet.

Off the esplanade, he flagged down a taxi, and the driver helped them stuff their suitcases into the trunk. He took them back to the town's bus station, where, not quite three hours earlier, they had arrived on the bus from Simferopol. The atmosphere then had been hectic: vacationers vying for taxis, and a clutch of locals—mainly apartment brokers with brochures and business cards—clamoring for lodgers. At the time, Kotler had paid them little mind. He'd noticed them only insofar as they reminded him that it was with such people that he and his parents had lodged. They had taken a room with a middle-aged Russian couple who lived also with their married son and his

family. They had coexisted peaceably, without conflicts, for the entire month, sharing among them not only the kitchen but also the toilet. Simpler times. And now, since it was nostalgia that had, however convolutedly, brought him back to this place, he had no cause to regret what had happened at the hotel. On the contrary, if what he wanted was to revisit the past, to draw as closely to it as he could, then the Russian girl had done him a favor.

The scene at the bus station was no longer what it had been in the morning. Now there were far fewer people about, only a small number of locals grouped together at the end of the plaza, waiting listlessly, some holding their hand-lettered signs across their knees or down at their sides. They roused slightly at the sight of him, Leora, and their suitcases, but none bothered to approach. He and Leora were, after all, unlikely clients, heading, it would seem, in the wrong direction. A thought struck Kotler, and he told Leora to wait with the bags as he went into the bus station to consult the schedule. A stain of pessimism and defeat adhered to the people waiting outside, implicating them in their own bad fortune. Kotler could not repress the suspicion that if they were lingering, if they had failed to attract lodgers, it was for good reason.

—The next bus from Simferopol isn't due for another three hours, he told Leora when he rejoined her.

—And so …?

—When it comes, I expect more locals will return offering rooms. But that still leaves three hours.

—And those people there?

—Those forlorn-looking people? Somebody should teach them the importance of projecting an image of strength.

—We have three hours. You could give them a seminar.

—Yes, well, perhaps now is not the best time.

—Perhaps not.

—Three hours is long enough to investigate one or two places. If we don't find anything we like, we can return in time for the Simferopol bus and see what else materializes.

While they were speaking, Kotler noticed that some of the people had taken a keener interest in them, as if having picked up the scent. When Kotler and Leora started toward the group, two people separated themselves from the others and stepped forward to meet them. They did not appear to be in league; rather at odds. Both were middle-aged women, and each held a hand-lettered sign advertising accommodations. The one who took the lead was stouter and darker complexioned. Her hair had been cut short and dyed an unnatural shade of burgundy. Her features were regular, the eyes, Kotler noticed, a striking dark blue, and though her skin had thickened with age, he imagined that she had been alluring in her day. The second woman was short, shorter than the first, and appreciably shorter even than the diminutive Kotler. She was sinewy, the twin points of her collarbones jutting from the top of her summer frock. She was younger than the first woman by as much as a decade, her hair longer, wheat-colored, and undyed. Each woman wore a small gold Orthodox cross around her neck. Whereas, ethnically, the first woman was harder to place, the second had the snub features of a Russian peasant. Yes, the old game of deducing ethnicity; in this they were all participants, experts.

—Are you looking for a room? the first woman inquired.

—We are, Kotler replied.

—For how long?

—The week.

—I have it. If you'll come with me, I can show you.

—Why should he go with you? the second woman protested. I also have a room. And more convenient. Closer to the beach. Let's ask the client what he wants.

—Here is the difference between my room and hers, the first woman said. Hers may be closer to the beach by five minutes, but it is smaller and lacks a private bath. So it depends what you want. In my experience, people today prefer to have a private bath.

—And the price? Kotler asked.

—Whatever she offers you, the first woman said, I will match it.

—And the others? Kotler said, regarding those who had remained in place and who, in the shade of the glass-and-concrete hulk of the terminal, followed their conversation with a flat, disconsolate interest.

—You're welcome to talk to them. But none of them will offer you anything better. And besides, do you have the time to see every place? Why not come with me? I believe you will be satisfied. But if not, you can come back and try with someone else.

—As usual, Svetlana, you're very aggressive, the other woman said.

—*Pardon, madame?* Svetlana replied, the French words heavily accented with Russian. Exactly who is being aggressive? You have some nerve to insult me in front of clients.

—It's correct that my room doesn't have a private bath, the second woman said to Kotler and Leora, making a point of ignoring Svetlana. But I wouldn't call it smaller. It is also clean

and newly renovated. My husband, a qualified carpenter, did the work himself. And it is much closer both to the beach and the bus station. In the interest of saving time, why not come see it first? To go with her will take you twice as long.

Kotler exchanged a quick look with Leora to ascertain her opinion. What he saw from her was mostly demurral, abstention from the vote.

—Where are you from? Svetlana asked, thrusting herself more completely in front of the other woman.

—America, Kotler said and flashed another glance at Leora.

—Are you Jews? Svetlana asked ingratiatingly, in a tone Kotler had never much liked.

—Do you ask this question of all your clients?

—My husband is Jewish, Svetlana stated, as though it were an article of pride.

—Oh, and what of it? the second woman declared, stepping around Svetlana. Maybe my grandfather was a Jew?

—If you're Jews, Svetlana continued, you will understand what life is like for us here.

—Now you're Jewish too? the second woman scoffed. It's news to me. Well, if you're so Jewish, what are you still doing here? The other Jews, those with any sense, skipped off to Israel at the first opportunity.

—You see what we have to put up with, Svetlana said contemptuously.

—Is your husband from here? Kotler asked casually.

—No, from Kazakhstan, Svetlana said, and added defensively, There are many Jews from Kazakhstan.

—Well, I suppose it's better here than in Kazakhstan, Kotler said.

—If you have to struggle for your daily bread, it makes little difference, Kazakhstan or Crimea.

Kotler turned once more to Leora. He now had no trouble discerning her mind. He could tell that she disapproved of his inclination. She was savvy, disdainful of risk, and far less sentimental than he. Without a doubt, hers was the more prudent course, but he had never been good at stifling the contrarian part of his nature. And he was much too old to undertake a transformation.

—Doesn't it say in the Torah that you should first help your own kind? Svetlana pronounced.

—Does it? Kotler replied, but he had already made his decision. And even this comment didn't cause him to revise it.

He gripped the handle of his suitcase and tipped the bag so that it rested on its little wheels. Reluctantly, Leora did the same.

—Very well, Kotler said to Svetlana, after you.

TWO

To get to the house, they rode in Svetlana's boxy little Lada, not so old and yet seemingly unchanged from Soviet times, its interior smelling cloyingly of rose water. The drive, snaking up into the hills away from the coast, took only a few minutes, long enough for them to formally introduce themselves. Svetlana gave her full name, complete with patronymic, and Kotler and Leora provided their former Russian names, omitting their last names; thus, for the first time since his release from prison, Kotler presented himself as Boris Solomonovich, and for the first time since she was a Moscow kindergarten student, Leora introduced herself as Lena Isaacovna. If only for the purposes of reaching back in time, the use of his old name seemed appropriate. Not until he said it did he realize the extent to which simply identifying himself as Boris evoked a former self. A self very distinct from the man he had resolutely chosen to become. Boris. He might as well have said Borinka, the pet name his parents had used for him. His heart swelled at the ghostly sound of it in his head. And though he

recognized that he was in a delicate frame of mind, still he was surprised by how vulnerable, how sentimental he had become. How easily and intensely he could be moved by his own thoughts and recollections.

The house Svetlana brought them to was a single story and, like the neighboring houses, showed signs of deterioration and slapdash repairs. She veered her car sharply onto a pitted driveway and came to a stop in front of flaking, pale green stucco walls. Kotler noted that the roof was of terra-cotta tiles, but a newer addition, affixed to the main body of the house like a crude prosthesis, was covered with slanted corrugated metal. Beside this addition was a small patch of dry grass, the domain of some idle brown hens and a white goose. A stunted peach tree clung to life at the edge of the patch. It was an ordinary village house. A plot of land and its modest yield. A life of shtetl dimensions.

Kotler and Leora followed Svetlana to the house but left their bags in the trunk of the car so as not to give the impression of a fait accompli. At the entrance, they conspired to notice the white plastic mezuzah that had been fastened to the doorjamb. Svetlana, not oblivious, and with a glint of self-satisfaction, brushed the object with her fingertips and then pressed her fingers to her lips.

—Normally, my husband would be here, but Saturdays he takes the trolleybus early to Simferopol to go to synagogue. They don't always have ten men for services, the minyan. Svetlana said, savoring the last word.

Inside the house, she whisked them through the rooms that she occupied with her husband. The front door opened out to a sitting room with a sofa, coffee table, and television. Beyond

this stretched a corridor. On the right side of the corridor lay the kitchen, with a wooden table and four matching chairs, a modern refrigerator and stove, and a deep, old-fashioned enamel sink. On the left side of the corridor were three doors, all shut, behind which, Svetlana explained, were the bedroom she shared with her husband, the bedroom their two daughters had shared, and a bathroom. With the exception of the kitchen, which boarders were permitted to use, the rest of the rooms were exclusive to her and her husband. The walls of the corridor were adorned by a number of decorative plates, some of a folk-art variety—presumably local—and others porcelain, featuring historical renderings of foreign cities: Krakow, Prague, Zurich. There was a small wooden plaque with a bronze relief of the Wailing Wall—the kind sold on every street corner in Jerusalem. At the end of the corridor hung a framed portrait of a bride and groom.

—My oldest, Svetlana said, indicating the photo. Now in Simferopol. Her husband prefers to be unemployed there.

—He also attends the synagogue? Kotler asked playfully.

—It's not for him, Svetlana curtly replied.

—And your other daughter?

—She is at the university in Kharkov. She studies economics. A brilliant girl, but this summer she is working in a hairdresser's, Svetlana said and shrugged ruefully.

The corridor came to an end and they faced a door. A small window along the right side of the corridor admitted light. The left side of the corridor opened out to a vestibule. Three steps down was another door, which led to the scraggly yard.

—A private entrance, Svetlana said. You would have a key.

She then unlocked the door to the guest quarters and ushered

them into a room of some twenty square meters, hardly extravagant, but tidy and bright. It had everything one expected from such a room: a desk, two chairs, a dresser with a small television upon it, and a double bed with the pillows and blue coverlet precisely arranged. The floor was composed of square white tiles; the walls were also painted white. Above the desk hung a rectangular gilt-framed mirror, and above the bed an amateur watercolor of a seascape, with wheeling gulls and little sailboat. Between the desk and the dresser was the door to the celebrated toilet. Svetlana stood behind them as Kotler and Leora peered inside. They saw a light blue commode with its water tank, a sink of the same color, and the raised platform of the shower protected by a translucent plastic curtain. Like the rest of the quarters, the space was cramped but everything looked clean and in good repair.

—Towels are here, Svetlana said.

Folded over a rod that was screwed to the back of the door were two thin, stiff cotton waffle-print towels, not large enough to wrap around a grown person's waist—masterworks of Soviet fabrication.

With the tour concluded, they returned to the bedroom and inhabited a brief silence. Svetlana looked from Kotler to Leora and then said, So.

—We'll need a few minutes to discuss, Kotler said.

—Very well, Svetlana said.

Her eyes then ranged about the room and momentarily came to rest on the bed. She turned and regarded them both as though trying to communicate something wordlessly. A thing too embarrassing to say out loud.

—And if there are other things you need for the room …

Kotler took this as an allusion to the ambiguity of his and Leora's relations. In other words, the discreet offer of a folding cot.

—Thank you, he said.

Svetlana withdrew to the main house, doing a poor job of concealing her resentments: a resentment that they had not immediately agreed to take the room and a resentment that anticipated their inevitable refusal.

Once she had gone, Kotler sat on the bed, bouncing gently to test the firmness of the mattress.

—This is not a good idea, Baruch. It's not worth it.

—What about your sympathies?

—I don't need to prove my sympathies, and neither do you.

—But that's the problem with sympathies, Kotler said with a smile. One keeps needing to prove them.

—Baruch, to stay here is to ask for trouble. And the whole point of coming here was to evade trouble.

—The point. But not the whole point.

—You know what I mean.

—From that woman, we have nothing to fear.

—And from her husband?

—A Kazakh Jew in a Crimean town?

—A Russian Jew. If there is a Russian Jew in the world who doesn't know who you are, I haven't met him.

—Come, sit by me, Leora.

Kotler patted the spot beside him on the bed. Reluctantly, she did as he asked. Kotler reached for her hands and laid them on his thigh. The gesture was paternal and reassuring, but also undeniably more. Through the fabric of his trousers, Kotler felt the warm, birdlike weight of her hands. They sat quietly together

and allowed the moment to take its effect. Slowly, as if submitting to fatigue, Leora rested her head on Kotler's shoulder.

—There, my bunny, Kotler said.

What a picture they made, he thought. This voluptuous, serious, dark-haired girl with her head on the shoulder of a potbellied little man still wearing his sunglasses and Borsalino hat. Fodder for comedy. And yet, the girl's fingers slipping between the man's thighs dispelled comedy. In its place, the leap of animal desire.

—Leora, I agree this isn't the rational thing. The rational thing would be to stay with the other woman.

—The peasant.

—The hardy, noble peasant. Who doesn't care for Jews and doesn't read the international press.

—It isn't too late.

—Call it curiosity. Call it instinct. And I am a man who has followed his instincts.

—I thought it was principles.

—In my experience, they're one and the same.

Leora straightened up and looked at him.

—You know my position. What more can I say?

—If you trust me in large matters, trust me in small.

—Baruch, it isn't trust, it's agreement. Usually, I agree with you. I agree with you like with no one else.

—Well, then this time will be an exception. Or more precisely, an evolution. Between two people, trust is more important than agreement. I am asking for your trust. Do you trust me on this?

—I disagree with you, Baruch, but I will not fight with you about it.

—Good. That is the definition of trust.

They found Svetlana in the kitchen, rinsing beet greens in the sink.

—So you have decided? Svetlana asked, not bothering to extract her hands from the sink.

—We will take the room, Kotler said.

—Is that so? Svetlana said, warming not at all.

—We will pay in cash for the week in advance. If that suits you.

—Yes, Svetlana said evenly, that suits me.