

The Old Lady in the Park by Richelle Shem-Tov



In our neighbourhood, there is a large park developed some sixty years back. That was well before I was born. It slopes over the side of an incline, with the upper entrance leading into a street between houses and blocks of flats. The bottom of the park runs into the lower end of town. It slopes downwards with lawn-covered-hillocks, paved pathways and rocky steps bounded by a rock-covered wall. As the sun does its east-west course across the sky, shrubs and trees of all shapes and sizes which dot the landscape, cast patches of shade in different directions. These shadows tell the time of day and also the year, as do the leaves and multi-coloured blossoms of the trees as they herald the passing months and seasons.

In the late afternoon, on most summer days – when the sunlight is friendly and a cool breeze often blows, I take my small children there to play. There are many others in our park at that time of day. Some are young, some old, some with families or friends, some with their dogs and some take their elderly or disabled wards for a turn in the open air. They sit on the lawn or benches, chatting or reading or just gazing and dreaming. Then there are those who do their “walks” around the park and “my old lady” is one of them.

She may be seventy or perhaps eighty. She wears glasses and on occasion, sunglasses and a brimmed hat. Often enough though I can see her short curly hair and inquiring brown eyes. She walks with an even stride with the aid of two sticks, or are they Nordic poles? She has just a hint of a limp. Her ageing back is a little rounded by the determined pull of gravity, but from time to time she fights back and pulls up straight. She cannot be called fat or thin or tall or short – just average. Rather like me, I guess. She slows down a bit as she passes me and we smile. I feel as if I know her and indeed that she knows me. In fact, I feel we could be one, that she could be me, only older. It is true that my skin is still smooth, my hair naturally dark and my back straight. I am able to run up and down the lawns with my kids. Yet I sense that this, unknown person is connected to me; that she might have been a lot like me forty or fifty years ago.

She watches my children clambering over the rocks, possibly remembering her own small children doing just that. She watches them as they roll happily down the grassy slopes.

There are times when she looks up and I, in her wake, look up too. Together we watch the blue sky and ever-changing cloud formations. As evening approaches, the setting sun may turn the cloud tips pink or orange or at times may colour the whole Western sky in brilliant shades of orange. Birds fly and hop about wherever you look. I see my lady tilting her head slightly. Both she and I tune in to hear their song and chatter.



Together we take note of the human scene. We notice too the trees – those whose branches were bare in winter, now leafy and green. As spring advances into summer, we observe the purple Jacarandas - (does she, like me, remember those from a distant land of her

childhood?). Later in the season, we see the yellow flowers of the massive rose-wood

trees and others, whose names I wish I knew, blooming in yellow, red, white and lilac. We discern the different shades of green forming a backdrop to the entire park.

My lady watches the children play football on the school grounds bordering the park. She pauses there with a pensive look – perhaps she remembers someone loved and now gone, who walked with her here and revelled in seeing the boys at play.

I often see that pensive look. There are times when she seems far away. I wonder where she goes - perhaps to places where I cannot go. Is she thinking of her childhood in a far-away country? Of another family? Of her mother and father, siblings, people of that world - probably most of them now gone? Is she remembering another life? Was it a good one? I would like to think that. Do her thoughts take her back to her days when she was young and new in this country; maturing into adulthood, love and marriage, children? In her mind could she be straying into the worlds of her grandchildren, the world of yet another generation, experiencing life anew? When her face takes on a different look – one of concern, I wonder if she is pondering a problem concerning her life-long and hopefully, beloved partner; or perhaps something to do with the children, or the grandchildren. Are her thoughts about our country or the world at large? Like me she is surely a political being. Could it be memories of her past career? If she's in any way like me, it must have been good one.

Towards the end of her evening stroll she speeds up a little, takes a deep breath, often sends a parting smile in my direction as she walks out onto the street at the top of our park.

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A word about me:

I am Richelle Shem-Tov (Hirschmann), born in Polokwane (Pietersburg), South Africa where I grew up. I qualified as a physiotherapist at Wits University in Johannesburg. In 1962 at the age of 22 I came to Israel, to an ulpan on Kibbutz Maagan Michael. I worked as a physiotherapist in the Sharon hospital, Petach Tikva for 24 years, and as head of the department for the last 10 years, until my retirement in the year 2000. I am

the mother of four and grandmother of ten and live with my husband, Sabih outside of Tel Aviv.

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