

ROBERT SHUSTER

Eva Dreams of Heaven

There'd be palominos, she hoped, trotting across clouds to bring boys who'd kiss her, and lightning bolts she'd fling like spears at government buildings, and a dog that followed her everywhere, smart enough for tricks. Eva, almost a martyr, was imagining the next life while Vela adjusted the cylinder's shoulder straps and carefully folded wires around her bra. She stood almost naked, shivering in the mountain air, cold and anxious: she was only hours away from rising beyond even the clouds, even the moon. Only hours away from sending Salazar the cleric the opposite way, into a hell of cobras and eternal flame.

Cobras! Her mind was loose and wild since the slap. Little ugly Vela, his knee crippled by a government bullet, hobbled around her, fiddled with straps and wires, and said not a word. Not a word since she'd slapped him. Plenty talkative earlier, though—telling her how beautiful he found her long hair, how it was his duty to make sure she wasn't nervous—and then he'd caressed her bare spine. So her hand rose and struck. She had that power now. She was no longer just a child. Astonished, Vela leapt backward, nearly falling because of his knee. For the next hour, while she lectured him about how to treat a martyr, he sulked in the corner of the garage mumbling prayers of apology and dabbing a rag on his nose, which she'd managed to scratch with her

nails. He'd only begun again when one of the soldiers poked his head around the corner to inquire about the delay.

What else? She'd have seven pairs of sunglasses for each day of the week and a roomy helicopter to fly her to every star and planet. She'd be treated like a queen. But she wasn't there yet, and Vela, knowing nothing of royalty, found her a thick brown dress that made her look fat. It needed padding, Vela said, to hide the cylinder strapped at her waist. He quietly instructed with his coarse accent the importance of walking calmly, of approaching Salazar as she might greet a teacher. Running would not dignify her, would jeopardize her chance to be a martyr. But how could she stroll through the crowd looking like a pig? How could she wear such a rag in the next life? She wanted to slap him again, but he seemed so frightened now. Finished with the wires, he draped the awful dress over her, and suddenly it was done. The weight at her waist was heavier than the satchel she carried to school, but she would manage. Like a queen, she dismissed Vela by waving her hand, and a moment later her mother entered, veiled and solemn, escorted by a soldier. They kissed a photograph of her pudgy father on the beach in his swimsuit, Papi who they hadn't seen for a year, who was certainly dead, who'd be the first to greet her in heaven.

The van took dusty unmarked roads, and brought her down the mountain and across the valley to a market in the next city, where the outdoor stalls clanked with trinkets and leaked the fishy steam of boiling stews. They let her off alone, with strict instructions, and gave her a sack of rice to cradle at her waist, hiding the cylinder's bulge. Beyond the market, Salazar's distorted voice was already booming over loudspeakers, promising, promising, touched with evil. And his voice brought back to her the dream she had last night—she had almost forgotten it. In a sparkling palace, she was lying on an immense bed in a room wallpapered with sheets of gold, with tall chairs and a marble sink, when she heard her name. Someone was yelling it, but it sounded so small, echoey. Then she realized the sound was coming from the drain of the marble sink. She lowered her head, listening to the desperate voice, and peered into the dark hole. It was as if she were looking into a telescope that Papi had shown her once. She saw a man—bearded and tall in a black robe—writhing in a pit of flame,

screaming her name: Eva Eva Eva. She had awakened terrified, but no, no, she pushed on through the crowd, she would not let him frighten her now.

It was a bright, restless day. In a steady wind, the market's canvas tents filled and sagged like giant lungs. Around her, glum donkeys and bicycles ringing tiny bells and stooped women and scarred cars and a few tourists holding onto their wide hats flowed slowly in one direction like junk in a river. Everything moving toward Salazar. How many hundreds of brains, how many millions of thoughts were here, and not a single one contained her secret.

She floated with them for a while, clutching the rice, until she found the side street and the green door next to the brick chalked with an E. The trickery seemed too simple. She would have preferred something more challenging, like maps and codes and signals. She knocked the way she'd been told (at least there was a secret knock!), and when the door opened she was going to tell them about hearing Salazar already, but the shadowy face did not look pleased. Eva recognized some of the people here, the same ones who'd once told her that the government could make anybody vanish. The same ones who'd told her about the need to take away the center and split things up into parts (a hand chopped into five fingers cannot make a fist, they said). A month after Papi had disappeared, they'd arrived at her home on a wet night, solemn as priests. The rain had fallen like pebbles thrown on the roof, but they'd spoken gently of elegance and paradise.

Now they were not so kind. They ushered her in quickly, chattering about her lateness. The whole plan might be in danger of failing now. The crowd was already too big, they said, she might not be able get near the podium. They had not expected so many—so many zombies!—and now that she was late, it was a risk. The dim light held the smell of drink and smoke and anger, the way Papi used to smell after coming home from his meetings with the Liberty Group. She regretted the slap now and the delay it had caused, silently begging the next life for forgiveness. They shuffled about her, scolding, peering between curtains, making phone calls. They fussed over the radio that would make the cylinder work. A dark woman told Eva they needed to make sure she was not recognized, so she snipped Eva's hair, and all

the days it had taken to grow fell sadly at her feet. The woman rubbed Eva's forehead and neck with scented oil, then replaced the sack of rice with a bouquet of flowers. The petals touched her nose for a moment, and Eva was overwhelmed by fragrances. Finally they blessed her, and she left by the back door, her head full of directions and alternatives.

At the edge of the field she could see that they had been right, that the crowd was already thick. A gathering of zombies, listening to the booming voice. What did they hear that kept them applauding? A number of times this person or that had explained how Salazar with his government links was using the church to deceive the people. How a government squad with bandannas worn like women's scarves had certainly taken Papi, who had so earnestly linked himself with the Liberty Group. Links! Everyone carried them like coins in their pockets, tiptoeing around so they wouldn't jingle.

The crowd was a wall. The men before her with children perched on their shoulders squinted and nodded, not budging. The women stood on their toes, stretching slender necks for Salazar. She would have trouble getting through. A gust of wind swooped down as quick as a bird and brought tears to her eyes. She could not see the podium. She was supposed to reach it before Salazar stepped away, but his fickle speeches, they'd warned her, were always so unpredictable, four hours one week, twenty minutes the next. Of course she'd reach it. She would present the bouquet to Salazar and become a martyr. Rushing upward, she imagined, like wind herself.

Which way? She tried to guess, she tried to use the sun as a guide, but was distracted by a fat boy, fidgeting near his father, who began to taunt with stupid gestures that began at his crotch. Stay calm, they'd told her, walk slowly no matter what. Eva pulled her shortened hair, anxious to have it fly again like a curtain to hide her face. No one had warned her about the woman with the scissors. But she scowled at the fat boy because she was a martyr and then tried to find an opening, careful to protect her flowers. The wires chafed her ribs, but she was too afraid to make adjustments. Do not touch it, Vela had cautioned, it could jeopardize so much. Salazar's voice surrounded her, got inside her, vibrated everything from toes to head. She couldn't see him

because the men were too tall. They were always like that, in your way and too tall.

Be my periscope, her father had said how long ago, when she was only as tall as a monkey. Papi had hoisted her up on his shoulders, above the ocean of heads, a crowd just like this one who had gathered for something political. She called it the ocean, that big crowd, when he told her what a periscope was, though she'd only seen the real ocean once, the summer Papi drove trucks to the coast and back, and the frothy waves chased her across the sand that smelled like stew. Wouldn't it be nice, Papi said on the beach, if you could erase all your terrible days the way the water washes away your footprints? The government had taken him one morning after breakfast. He'd gone off to work with a spot of oatmeal on his jacket, which she didn't tell him about for fear of getting him into a rage. Always ready to burst just before he left, and just after he came home. How often she thought she might have prevented everything by just telling him, making him late. She tried to remember sitting on his shoulders, looking down at the swirl of thinning hair on the back of his head, which was like the picture of a storm.

That same fat boy, thinking himself cunning no doubt, plucked a flower from her bouquet and put it in his teeth, mocking. You did not steal flowers from a martyr. Especially not this fat boy who so rudely insulted her already. She grabbed his wrist, scolding him, but he squirmed free. She would teach him a lesson with her newfound power. She followed him, slipping between zombies, until she ran into another solid wall of crowd, where the boy managed to squeeze through like a rat, disappearing with the flower. She could hear him laughing. Her cheeks grew hot with hatred for him, a boy already practicing the behind-your-back tricks of the government. Then the father was there, looming up, his ugly bearded mouth full of insults—how dare she confront his son! For an instant, Eva wished for the radio button to be pressed—right here, right now—so that she could send this man and his son to hell. Instead she stepped back and stupidly stumbled, scraping her hand on the dirt. The father was gone, the crowd ignored her, but she had blundered. Standing, she felt off-balance and took several breaths to steady herself.

But it was something else. Her legs went wobbly the way they once did at a school play when she'd forgotten her lines: she was coming apart. One of the cylinder's straps had broken.

She felt turned inside out, seeing and hearing nothing but her own pulse of fear, unable to breathe for how long, how long, before the day crept back to her—the smell of boiling fish, the soreness of her ribs, Salazar's booming voice. The cylinder had slipped to her knees, dangling by one strap to make a big bump near her stomach, but no one seemed to have noticed. She scooped it up with one arm, held the flowers with the other. Could she fix it? No, no. It was impossible to continue without everyone seeing what she had. They were supposed to be watching her with binoculars or a telescope or something, but when she turned around to look back at the town, she saw nothing but more zombies jammed in behind her. Salazar was stretching his words now, as if breathing in the wind and blowing it back out, an ogre, an ogre. He was urging cooperation, urging the crowd to join hands. They obeyed in an instant. A tangle of fingers grew toward her, bony, cold, dirty. She clutched everything tighter, but the hands, eager for something, found her elbows instead. She wanted to spit, to smack them away. She would never reach Salazar. She'd been a fool to chase that boy. How she'd ruined it all! Just a dumb boy who knew nothing of her closeness to the next life. The cylinder was slipping again and her arm began to burn.

What had they said? It came to her now, a glimmer of relief. If you cannot reach him, they said, if you are absolutely sure you cannot reach him, stay with the crowd, stay with as many people as you can, for you will be no less a martyr. She kneeled beneath all these hands, pulling the cylinder under her dress, and prayed to the next life. If only she could go back and start over, erase this terrible day the way Papi had invented: stomping big footprints in the sand and watching them melt away under the tongues of sea. Where could she start? She did not slap Vela, so he spent enough time to make sure the straps were sturdy. She wore a dress that didn't make her look fat. The dark woman forgot to bring her scissors. She gave a flower to the teasing boy, and he cringed with embarrassment. The ugly hands did not obey Salazar, but

instead let her pass easily to the podium, where she—but how far back could she go, how far? She told Papi about the oatmeal, he did not vanish like a trinket swiped at the market—

When she lifted her head she saw the crowd had gathered around her in a ring, but at a distance, as if in a circus. They shouted things she did not understand. Then it occurred to her—they were speaking the language of angels! She had arrived in the next life! A wild-eyed palomino circled, snorting, carrying a young man who wore a beautiful angel uniform with big gold buttons. She offered her flowers to him, and the shouts grew louder. Papi should be here somewhere. She tried to stand and move toward them, for surely they were asking her to join them.

But one of the angels tossed something, which smacked her in the arm, and she felt a numbing pain as sudden as the touch of ice. And when she reasoned that there should be no pain in the next life, and when that same young man on the palomino started shouting Wires! Stay back! and when she saw that the cylinder had rolled out from under her dress, she tried to lift herself and run. But the cylinder was still attached and another rock skipped off the dirt and hit her ankle, and she was down again. Was someone watching with that telescope? Was someone going to help?

The young man galloped around and around on his jittery horse, its nostrils flared, its eyes as blank as eggs. The zombies were advancing, testing their bravery. She thought she saw the fat boy waving a stick. The horse dust and the wind and the sharp voices made everything all fuzzy, but Eva, squinting, managed to squeeze out a vision of a figure she thought must be Salazar. He had wandered to the edge of the stage now, a tall, bearded, white-haired man with raised arms, begging, begging, trying to calm his crowd. There was worry in his mouth. He did not look as mean as they said. He did not look like a man who could be friendly with killers. But she wanted more than anything to see Papi. What could they be doing back in the village with their radio except sleeping? As the rocks flew, striking her back, Eva shook the cylinder with the last of her strength, shook it and pulled at wires, trying to make it work.

ROBERT SHUSTER is the author of the forthcoming novel *To Zenz̄i* (New Issues Press), winner of the 2019 AWP Prize for the Novel and a recipient of a James Jones First Novel Fellowship. Shuster's short fiction has appeared in *North American Review*, *Witness*, *Mississippi Review*, *Stone Canoe*, *The Winter Anthology*, and *Alaska Quarterly Review*, among other publications. He lives in Westchester County, NY.