VICTORIA UNIVERSITY

DOCTORAL THESIS

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Inheriting Exile:
Transgenerational Trauma and Palestinian-Australian Identity

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This
research was
conducted on stolen
Aboriginal land that was
never ceded. I pay my respects
to the ancestors, elders and families of the
Boonwurrung, Waddawurrung and Wurundjeri
of the Kulin nations, the traditional owners
of University land in Victoria,
as well as to all traditional
owners and their leaders
past future and
emerging.

Doctor of Philosophy Declaration

I, Samah Sabawi, declare that the PhD thesis entitled Inheriting Exile: Transgenerational Trauma and Palestinian-Australian Identity, is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signature:

Date:

November 12, 2019

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Abstract

Inheriting Exile is a creative-critical exploration into the Palestinian-Australian experience of trauma, exile, identity and belonging. Through the personal and generational lenses of two writers, father and daughter, it sets out to navigate various modes of transmission of trauma and memory, primarily building on and going beyond Edward Said's conceptualisation of exile (2001) and Marianne Hirsch's theorisation of postmemory (Hirsch, 2012).

My thesis has two components. The first is the exegesis, in which I utilise an array of critical and autoethnographic strategies in order to engage with and interrogate Edward Said's theorisation of the nourishment of the Palestinian identity in exile and Marianne Hirsch's conceptual framework of postmemory - the transmission of trauma to second and third generation Holocaust survivors who may not have experienced it first-hand. Through bridging together Said and Hirsch's works, I introduce the notion of 'inhabitation'. I define inhabitation as a term that reflects the internalisation of both place and displacement, highlighting the myriad of ways in which Palestinians in exile, denied the right to return and to inhabit their homeland, might subsequently become imaginatively inhabited by both desire for the homeland and its denial.

The second component is the creative project: a biographical novel with the working title *Coffee with George*, based on my father Abdul Karim Sabawi's life in Palestine. My father is a celebrated Palestinian poet and novelist who was exiled from Gaza in the aftermath of the 1967 War and emigrated to Australia in 1980. In writing his story, I offer an intimate portrayal of the lived experience of first-generation displaced Palestinians: their past traditional way of life in the homeland, the social and cultural environment they were uprooted from and the traumatic memories they continue to carry with them.

This research adds new knowledge to global understandings of what it means to be an exiled Palestinian, or a Palestinian born or raised in diaspora. It also contributes to the 'trauma genre' that has so far largely neglected the experience of *al-Nakba* and its impact on subsequent generations of Palestinians. *Al-Nakba* literally translates to 'Catastrophe,' and is used to refer

to the 1948 systematic expulsion and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian population and the establishment of the state of Israel on what was the territory of Palestine.

The research also contributes to Australian literature through the creation of new literary work in the form of the biographical novel *Coffee with George*. Currently, very few creative works by Palestinian-Australians have been published or performed. Literature – theatre, fiction, film and poetry – by offering us insights into personal experience, can provide powerful vehicles to engage our diverse communities and to build cultural and artistic bridges between Australians of all ethnic backgrounds.

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INTRODUCTION

"*I am the one where there is nothing…"*

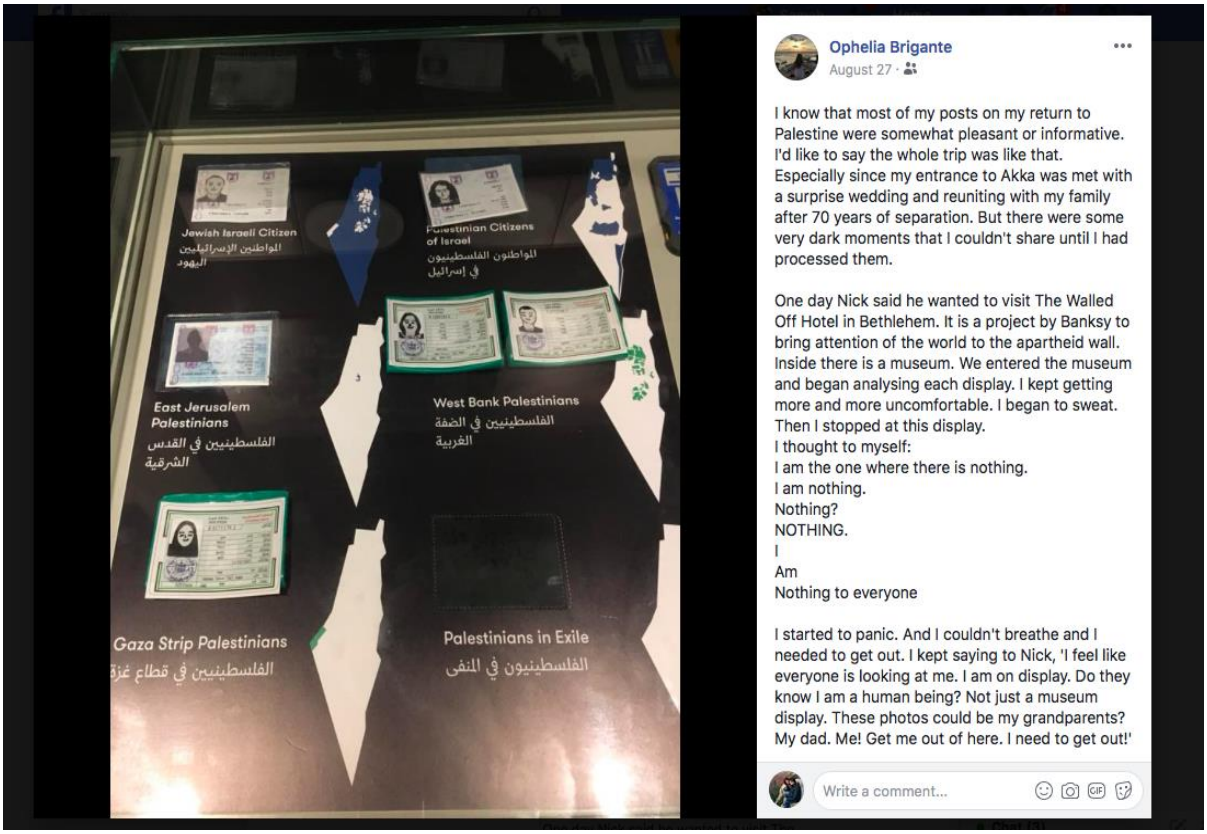
As a second generation Palestinian in exile, it was difficult for me to ignore a Facebook post by Zeina (August 27, 2018), who uses the pseudonym Ophelia Brigante. Zeina, born in Lebanon to Palestinian refugees, had "returned" for the first time to a place that she had never been to before. She was on a visit to her ancestral home in Akka (Acre). Like me, Zeina is a Canadian-Australian-Palestinian, and like many Palestinians of her generation, she has lived in many countries, juggles national identities with the skill of an acrobat; stores languages and dialects on the tip of her tongue, and traverses borders and time zones with the ease of crossing a suburban road. Zeina belongs to the world. But only Palestine belongs to her.

Born and raised in exile, Palestine could be said to inhabit Zeina to the point where she identifies first and foremost as Palestinian. Her return trip to her ancestral land is only made possible because Israel no longer sees her as a threat to its demographically Jewish character. To Israel, Zeina is one less Palestinian they need to worry about. She has no Palestinian ID and is one of more than 6 million Palestinians whom Israel has banished into exile and stripped away their legal right to return to live in or claim their land. To Israel, Zeina's links to Palestine are, like Palestine itself, erased from its official records. She is now a Canadian-Australian tourist, and like all tourists, she would have to leave when her vacation ends.

In an email granting me permission to reference her post, Zeina asked me not to use her full real name, explaining her reason for making her identity invisible on social media: 'I couldn't get a job in the legal field writing and posting on Palestine under my real name. I had to use a pseudonym so as not to be punished in real life. Ophelia can say things Zeina cannot. And Ophelia has legitimacy Zeina does not' (Zeina 2018, personal communication, 8 September).

I followed Zeina's posts from Palestine with interest. One particular post stood out for me. It was about a profound experience she had when she visited international graffiti artist Banksy's 'Walled Off Hotel' in Bethlehem. As she stood before an art installation piece displaying in a large frame the various types of IDs which Israel designates to the Palestinian people who have remained in the grip of its occupation, Zeina's eyes searched for her place in the frame. Even

though she knew that these IDs fragmented her people, reduced them to prisoners inside walls in what many have described as ‘Bantustans’ (Dugard and Reynolds, 2013), that limited their movement and freedom, Zeina also knew those IDs were the only official documents acknowledging the right of Palestinians to live in historic Palestine within the Israeli legal system. As she searched for her place within the frame, she was confronted with a painful reality. Under the caption, ‘Palestinians in exile’ she saw a blank space. She saw nothing. No number. No ID. Nothing. The emotional impact of this was shattering. ‘I am the one where there is nothing.’ Zeina wrote on her Facebook page, ‘I am nothing to everyone’.



We – myself and two-thirds of the Palestinian population, roughly six million (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2015) exiled around the world, -are like Zeina. We are the blank space. We are the erased majority who have been told that we are ‘nothing to no one.’ Perhaps it is this realisation of being erased and reduced to nothing that drives the Palestinian people in exile, young and old, to cling to their national identity. It is as if Palestine’s survival as an idea, as a struggle, and as a nation, rests on our ability to resist this erasure with ferocity. We are obligated to fill in this blank space with poetry, songs, activism, food, culture, dance and all

that is in between. We, the Palestinians in exile, are constantly filling that blank space with all the pieces that keep Palestine alive. We have given Palestine a home inside of us – lest we ourselves be erased.

Fifty years before Zeina's Facebook post was written, and soon after the 1967 war, my father wrote a poem describing his erasure from his homeland. Abdul Karim Sabawi is the first generation in our family to be banished into exile. He wrote this poem[1] on the first morning that he woke up to find himself a stateless refugee in Jordan:

if only the occupiers' bullets had mercy
shot through our legs… tore our knees.
if only we dissolved into your soil
salt in your earth…nutrients in your fertile fields
if only we didn't leave
the gates of our hearts are wide open for misery
don't ask us where this wind is blowing
don't ask about a home ... a window or a tree
the bulldozers were here…the bulldozers were here
and the houses in our village fell like a row of decayed teeth
they haven't colonised Mars yet
and the moon is barren… uninhabitable
so, carry your children … your memories…and follow me
we can live in the books of history

Zeina and my father, both Palestinian-Australians, are generations apart, yet they share this experience and pain of erasure and loss. It is this experience that leads me to ask the questions that drive this research project. What does it mean to be a Palestinian-Australian and does this meaning differ from one generation to the next? What are the factors which shape our understanding of who we are as Palestinian-Australians? Do we have claim to either identity, or to both, or do we only exist within the hyphen that connects our two worlds? How do we relate to our ancestral past and how do we inherit our ancestors' pain and memories to the extent of being shattered, the way Zeina was, when we are confronted with the reality of the erasure of our Palestinian identity?

[1] A version of this poem appears on Abdul Karim's Sabawi's website. Both versions here and on the website have been translated by Samah Sabawi. https://abdulkarimsabawi.com/2012/06/06/erasure-45-years-of-israeli-occupation/

In this thesis, I do not claim to provide definitive answers to these questions, or to define something as complex and as multifaceted as 'identity.' Nor do I, through this work, claim to speak on behalf of all Palestinian-Australians. Instead, through the interplays of the creative and critical work of the thesis, I seek to explore my own perspectives on the various unique elements that make up who we are, both as first and as second generation Palestinian-Australians, born or raised on this land, while always inhabited – culturally, socially, emotionally and politically – by Palestine.

This thesis is divided into two parts. Part One is the exegetical component. It consists of four chapters. In the first chapter, 'A Decolonised Mode of Inquiry,' I argue for the importance of decolonising research methodologies by adopting tools and research practices that honour and respect the voices and experiences of indigenous and marginalised peoples. I illustrate the ways in which both autoethnography and creative writing lend themselves to collecting and sharing oral testimony, using storytelling as a method of inquiry into situations where historic archival material does not exist, or perhaps has been deliberately erased. Such methods are particularly vital in contributing toward better understanding of the Palestinian experience. Finally, in this chapter, I offer details of my own methodology and modes of exploration and the challenges both personal and collective, ethical and political that I have encountered along this path of inquiry. In using oral testimony, poetry and storytelling, I honour and validate our traditional Palestinian ways of knowing and remembering, placing my work within a growing genre of innovative, respectful and inclusive decolonised research.

I begin the second chapter of Part One, 'Invaders' Fears of Memories,' by referencing Edward Said's conceptualisation of Orientalism (Said, 1978) regarding the objectifying and stereotypical representation of people in the 'East' by those in the 'West,' in order to explain how the Palestinian people were made invisible by western academic, cultural, literary and photographic records of Palestine prior to 1948. I draw on the works of Nur Masalha (2012), Rosemary Sayigh (2013) and others to make the connection between this historic erasure of Palestinians and the absence of *al-Nakba*, the Palestinian experience of ethnic cleansing and dispossession from the 'trauma genre' (Sayigh, 2013). I also explore the complicity of higher learning institutions in not only supporting this process of erasure, but also in censoring voices of academics who are critical of Israel.

In Chapter Three of Part One, 'Permission to narrate… still,' I introduce Said's famous essay 'Permission to narrate' (1984), comparing his experiences with the media coverage of the Palestine/Israel conflict in 1982 with my personal experiences of media coverage of the conflict during Israel's bombardment of Gaza in 2014. Placing myself autoethnographically within the research, I draw on my own experience and that of others within the Palestinian-Australian community to explore the representation of Palestinian people and issues in Australian media, as well as the representation of Palestinian voices within Australian mainstream media networks.

In Chapter Four of Part One, 'The Guardianship of Palestine in the Exile Milieu,' I bring together two key theoretical frameworks: Said's theory that Palestinian national identity is nourished in exile (Said, 2001); and Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, as a way of describing the transmission of trauma to second and third generation survivors of large-scale trauma such as the Holocaust (Hirsch, 2012). These two approaches help to illustrate the ways in which exile, postmemory and ongoing trauma may impact and shape the identity of second - and third-generation Palestinians, born and/or raised in exile. I share my own story of growing up with no roots and no homeland, and the events that have significantly shaped my identity as a Palestinian. I introduce the idea of being emotionally inhabited by a homeland from which I have been barred from inhabiting geographically, of being a recipient of trauma that I never personally experienced, and of being part of a generation born and raised in exile who are nevertheless emotionally, intellectually, socially and politically inhabited by Palestine.

Part Two of this thesis is the creative project, a biographical novel titled *Coffee with George*. Based on more than sixty hours of interviews with my father Abdul Karim Sabawi over a period of three years. The novel begins in 1918 in Gaza's Tuffah district with the birth of my grandfather, and ends with my father's exile in Queensland, Australia in 2018, where he has become known as George.

To date, there has been limited qualitative or discursive research into what it means to be a Palestinian-Australian. The works of Cox and Connell (2003), Mason (2007) and Elturk (1992) have made significant contributions towards understanding the Palestinian-Australian experience, but all three are outdated, with the most recent undertaken more than ten years ago. In addition, there has been no creative work which reflects and interrogates – either autoethnographically or fictively - the position and experience of both first and second

generation Palestinian-Australians within the context of trans-generational trauma and identity. Creative writing and autoethnography, used as research tools, capture and relay experiences that are not easily numerated or standardised. By placing myself into the research as both subject and researcher, I am able to draw from personal as well as collective experiences in order to offer critical, evocative, cultural and theoretical analyses that may be out of reach or too complex to articulate from the outside looking in.

As poet and author, and the daughter of a poet and author, I believe I am in a privileged position to do this research. To borrow from Edward Said, exiled poets and writers 'lend dignity to a condition legislated to deny dignity – to deny an identity to people' (Said, 2001, p. 139). This critical exploration of self and others, of identity and home, hopes to lend dignity to the Palestinian-Australian experience by documenting the journey of exile, and confronting the trauma of postmemories, a trauma inherited by second generation survivors who may have never experienced it first-hand (Hirsch, 2012).

PART ONE: WRITING PALESTINE IN THE BLANK SPACES

Heart/Homeless: A visual expression of Palestinian exile [Painting] by Manal Deeb (2019)

1 - A DECOLONISED MODE OF ENQUIRY

'Whoever writes his story will inherit the land of words, and possess meaning, entirely!'
Mahmoud Darwish (2006, p.126)

Borrowing the words of Indigenous researcher, Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith, I too would like to acknowledge that I write from 'the vantage point of the colonised' (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 1), and I add my voice to the growing community of researchers from indigenous and marginalised backgrounds, who recognise the inseparable links between western academia and knowledge production and the ideologies of colonialism. While all research, whether or not done in the context of indigenous or marginalised communities, needs to exhibit elements of decolonisation in order for it to 'interrupt and interrogate' traditional and past colonial structures (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). I illustrate here why this is especially crucial for research exploring the Palestinian experience. Honouring and validating our traditional methods of knowing and remembering, I reveal how my methodology utilises oral testimony, poetry and storytelling to build on and go beyond critical theoretic frameworks and conceptions, thus placing my work within a growing genre of innovative, respectful and inclusive decolonised research.

I grew up within a strong rich culture that relies on its oral traditions to remember, lament, teach, learn, celebrate and grieve. When I became a mother, I was happy to find at my disposal an infinite reserve of stories, poems, proverbs and songs to pass on to my children at least some of the wisdom, knowledge and memories I have inherited. But outside the challenges of motherhood, this rich reserve serves as a historic archive, referencing events that shape our lives as Palestinians, while protecting us from the horror of being erased.

Palestinians relied mostly on oral sources to document their experiences prior to, during and in the period following the establishment of Israel in 1948, an event Palestinians call *al-Nakba* or the catastrophe; a time when Jewish gangs terrorised and ethnically cleansed more than 400 Palestinian villages and towns, forcing 750,000 Palestinians, two thirds of the population, into exile, dispersed and forever stateless (Abu-Sitta, 2007), (Khalidi, 1992), (Masalha, 2012) and (Pappé, 2015).

Israel's deliberate and systematic erasure of the Palestinian presence on the land included the destruction of all Palestinian centralised state institutions and official archives (Firro, 2014). Nur Masalha, one of the most prominent analysts and historians of modern Palestine, spent years researching Palestinian history and culture, only to conclude that 'much of the Palestinian material culture, landscape, toponymy and geography, which had survived the Latin Crusades, were obliterated by the Israeli state' (Masalha, 2012, p. 2). This destruction was usually accompanied by looting, an act described as 'common' by Israeli researcher Gish Amit (2011, p. 6).

The declassification of most of Israel's official 1948 documents over the last two decades, brought to light the 'catastrophic consequences' of the establishment of Israel on Palestinian culture (Amit, 2011, p. 6). According to Amit, homes abandoned by Palestinians in their desperate flight for safety were handed over, along with their contents, to the Israeli state; this included volumes of books, journals, and manuscripts (Amit, 2011). Approximately 30,000 books were collected between May 1948 and late February 1949 from Palestinian homes in Jerusalem, and incorporated into Israel's National Library collections; according to Amit, librarians from Israel's National Library accompanied the Israeli army into the abandoned Palestinian homes, and systematically took all the books that were there (Amit, 2011).

This claim was later confirmed by Israeli film maker Benny Brunner in his documentary *The Great Book Robbery* (2012). Brunner reveals through interviews with researchers, academics, historians and personal oral testimonies, how a total of 70,000 books were taken from private Palestinian libraries around the country. These books included priceless volumes of Palestinian Arab and Muslim literature, poetry, works of history, art and fiction. Thousands of these books were destroyed but some were added to the Israel National library's collection and remain there till this day in a section designated as 'abandoned property' (Brunner, 2012), (Amit, 2011) – totally disregarding the fact that this property belongs to a people who were forced to leave, and were not permitted the legal right to return to their homes, let alone to be reunited with their assets, including their books.

A few Palestinians managed to save some of their valuable and rare collections of art pieces, films, books and cultural artefacts, carrying their treasures into exile. These pieces were

gathered, and a new Palestinian national archive was established by the Palestine Liberation Organization in Lebanon in 1965. But in 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon and targeted the PLO national archive, giving its soldiers orders to loot and confiscate its entire contents (Hijazi, 1982), (Institute for Middle East Understanding, 2019).

Destruction and looting of the Palestinian archives, documents, photographs and books, have meant increased Palestinian reliance on oral history as a means of knowledge production. Firro (2014) looks at Palestinian non-hegemonic oral history and Israel's hegemonic written/archival history, and the struggle for what is deemed to be reliable 'raw materials' that can be translated into evidence deemed as facts. He highlights the notion that 'facts' are never 'innocent' (Firro, 2014, p. 4), that historians can present their own bias in the interpretation of events, and therefore, 'most written documents are based on oral testimonies and descriptions of events that quite possibly were deliberately distorted at the time of their occurrence' (2014, p. 6). Reliability and accuracy of both the written and oral sources rests on how these sources are evaluated and analysed and transferred into data appropriate for revealing a historic narrative (Firro, 2014).

The fact that Palestinian history and culture continue to survive through oral traditions with songs, poetry and storytelling passed on from one generation to the next, is a testimony to the strength and power of this mode of knowledge production. For this reason, I also rely on these oral traditions in this research. Through creative writing and an array of autoethnographic strategies, I invoke poetry, storytelling and personal testimonies as modes of inquiry and representation. By doing so, I hope to present ethical and respectful research that is both sympathetic and useful (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012), through engaging with, and listening to the concerns of my marginalised community in the diaspora as well as the community that remains in the grip of Israel's occupation.

In many ways, this thesis looks in two directions: it is a story about me and my own family, but it is also about my looking at my own people, and at our collective experiences in relation to the geographical, emotional and familial territory of Palestine. I do not claim objectivity but rather use my subjective experience to shed light on my community and to fill the gap of knowledge of what it means to be Palestinian-Australian.

RECLAIMING THE NARRATIVE THROUGH CREATIVE WRITING

The creative writing component of my thesis is central to my exploration. Through the creation of this new literary work, I open the vault of personal, familial and cultural memories in order to develop a new theoretical perspective that goes beyond trauma, postmemory and exile to what I term 'inhabitation'; in this sense, my overall thesis – novel and exegesis - refers to the complex ways in which our Palestinian identity in exile is nurtured and driven by a homeland that inhabits our hearts and minds and which finds expression in our words and our art.

I had initially planned to use *'Inhabited'* for the title of my novel in order to reflect generally the myriad of ways in which we are inhabited by stories of our past and fear of the present, but also specifically to speak to the way in which my father's voice inhabits me; this was a crucial aspect of the methodology of my research and writing practice. But the title was changed to *Coffee with George* in an effort to capture and insert the pain of exile, erasure and dislocation within the title, in a way that is subtle - because what exiles feel and experience is often obscured and inaccessible. And although my father's Australian name 'George' makes the title of the work, it is Karim's story that is written; an act of defiance and reclaiming of identity and narrative.

The novel is based on almost sixty hours of interviews I've conducted with my father. My father, Abdul Karim Sabawi, a Palestinian novelist and poet, was forced out of Gaza in the aftermath of the 1967 war. He came to Australia in 1980 via the refugee camps of Jordan and the newly constructed desert cities of Saudi Arabia. He acquired Australian citizenship in 1983 at forty-one years of age, and, with that, he became a citizen of a country for the first time in his life. His story sheds light on the experience of first generation Palestinian-Australians and their struggle for home, identity and voice.

The novel is written in the third person. I adopted this technique in order to provide me, as the writer, with enough distance to allow for my own voice as a storyteller, to emerge louder than that of my father's, the protagonist of the story. My interviews with my father are at times a tug of war between the story I want to write and the memories he wishes me to reconstruct; this has been a struggle of integrity, between creative writers as well as the tension between my own voice in this project and my loyalty to the experiences and words of my father. In the prologue I describe this process, as I imagine it told in my father's voice:

> ‘She offers me her words to reconstruct my life. She encourages me to open up. She picks at my wounds and confronts me with my contradictions. She bribes me with her attention and praise. She tests my patience. I will not stand before her, vulnerable and tired. I am not an old open book with falling out pages and faded ink that needs to be reprinted. I am not an abandoned old building that needs to be restored. I am still standing. I am the voice in her head. Her mentor. Her teacher. Her father. My answers shape her questions and my words roll off her tongue.’

Writing the life of another writer is hard enough, but when it is the daughter doing the writing, that tension is heightened. There are at least two stories warring here: the story that I want to write and the story my father wants to tell. I want to move fast, and he wants to linger in the memories. I tell him, ‘Baba, I’ve already written 40,000 words and you’re still a young boy. I need you to grow up so we can get to your exile and begin writing the next chapter.’ He smiles. 'I've been exiled enough. For now, let's stay in Gaza … in Omar Al-Mokhtar street. There is a story about the Armenian photographer.... you will like this one...' He begins to tell another story. I sigh. I cry. Then I surrender. I too wish I could stay with him in that glorious period forever.

The creative process has been an exhausting and emotional rollercoaster. Together, father and daughter, storytellers and writers, we recreate the past, and resurrect the details of a world that has become out of our reach. Palestine: the scent of lemon blossoms, the cries of the sardine sellers, the hustle and bustle of Gaza’s railway station, the sycamore trees, the simple life in Tuffah district before it all began to unravel. Then comes the catastrophe: with the *al-Nakba*, as seen through the eyes of my six-year old father, Karim, the sweet memories take a dark turn. Together, as father and daughter, we delve into the trauma, the fear, the dispossession and loss; the massacres, the bombs, and the terror in the sky. Then life goes on once again, and the six-year-old goes to school, grows up, falls in love, starts a family and becomes a famous writer before it unravels once more. Gaza falls under Israeli occupation and my father is sent into exile, just as I am born. My birthdays are forever a reminder of how many years we have been uprooted from the homeland.

The stories of my father’s life are told in stand-alone chapters based on the significant events it covers, woven together through a chronological timeline, starting from 1918 with the birth of Sheik Hussein, my grandfather, and ending with my father’s leap over the cactus hedge and

into exile in 1967. The epilogue gives the readers a glimpse into my father's life in 2018 and the author's notes tell the rest of my father's and my own story. Threaded through all these stories and events in the novel is my father's 'character,' Karim, who is born in the poor neighbourhood of Tuffah in Gaza in 1942, and whose imagination and personality become a strong central focus. Although some stories and some characters are fictional, in principle and in general structure the novel is based on historic truths and real-life events which my father has either experienced, witnessed or stories which he's been told.

Karim, my father's character, is as true as possible to my father's real-life experiences, drawn from our interviews and on my own knowledge of our family history. But all the characters around him, including his extended family have shades of fiction or are completely fictional. However, it must be noted that even in undertaking to represent Karim as being as 'true to life' as possible, as a creative writer I am aware that representation changes things, and that to some extent, I will shape my father as I see and know him. I'm also aware that my father, being a creative writer himself, may embellish some stories in order to, in his words, 'make them more interesting'. The novel therefore is necessarily hybrid, borrowing from life writing, fiction and biographical genres.

While conducting interviews with my father for this research, I have found a freedom to explore the vaults of memory in a way that would not have been possible if I was to rely purely on a historic archive. As argued by Caunce (1994), unlike static documents, a conversation with a living participant can allow for views and memories to be expanded and for more vivid details that a historic document may not be able to provide. To ensure the reliability and validity of the testimony my father provides, and the personal stories I share from my own lived experience, I place these stories within a collective experience, referencing other Palestinian testimonies or research based on their testimonies to show that they are consistent and that they fit within the overall historic records of the events that shape them, such as photographs or written documents (Hoffman, 1974).

My choice to include some fictional and partly fictionalised characters is an important device that allows me the freedom to veer away from my father's personal stories, in order to tell more of the collective story of Palestine in all its dimensions and geographic landscape. The inclusion of the larger context has the potential to enhance our understanding of the overall

experience, the ongoing dance between the story of the individual and that of the group. As I see it, my responsibility as an author is to engage with key events that shaped and defined not only our personal past as individuals and as a family, but also the collective past of the Palestinian people. For example, my father's real-life grandmother Aziza was part of the population that was ethnically cleansed from Salamah. She lived the rest of her life as a refugee in Gaza. But in *Coffee with George*, Aziza refuses to leave her home and is shot dead by Zionist militias. I made a decision that her fictionalised death was necessary in order to most effectively tell the story of the hundreds of Palestinians who were massacred in 1948, as part of a systematic policy to depopulate Palestinian villages and towns in order to establish Israel as a Jewish state with a Jewish majority (Abu-Sitta, 2007), (Khalidi, 1992), (Masalha, 2012), (Pappe, 2015). My judgement was that her 'death' in these circumstances would serve the function of intensifying shock and engagement for the reader; and while it was not my great-grandmother who was murdered, somebody else's great-grandmother was.

The style in which I'm writing the novel is also reflective of a Palestinian Arab storytelling culture in which I was raised. This was one rich with supernatural and spiritual elements; magnificent myths, premonitions, superstition and fables are part of the daily lives and experiences of the people of Tuffah, the district in Gaza where my father was born. Stories in that world are passed on through the fine oral traditions of the *Hakawaties*, an Arabic word that literally means storytellers. *Hakawaties* use the oldest form of storytelling, relying on voice and narration to captivate crowds every night at cafes across the Arab world, telling extraordinary fables and whisking the crowds on journeys that make their imaginations soar. I evoke that style in the hope to honour this tradition; my writing might also be seen to border on magical realism, a literary genre first associated with the works of 20th Century Latin American fiction, which incorporates fantastical elements into realistic fiction anchored in the inescapable pain of historic truths and human tragedies (Hart and Ouyang, 2005).

PLACING MYSELF IN THE RESEARCH

My family emigrated to Australia in 1980 and we lived on a farm on top of a hill in rural Victoria. One fine spring morning shortly after we were granted Australian citizenship, my father, no longer a stateless refugee, sat on a deck chair on our terrace and surveyed the

panoramic view of the Dandenong Ranges that surrounded our new home. It was breathtaking! Yet tears welled up in his eyes and a sense of insurmountable sadness gripped his heart. This was his moment of realisation; no matter how far he travelled, how serene his surroundings, how peaceful his life may be, he would always feel crushed by the injustice of being trapped outside his homeland and never allowed the right to return. I gave him a pen and a piece of paper. I always gave him a pen and a piece of paper whenever he started to cry. He birthed on the paper a new poem for Palestine. *You inhabit me like anxiety* he wrote. Thirty-five years later, I found myself facing my own moment of realisation when Gaza, the city of my birth, was being bombed. I wrote in my diary:

> It is 2014. I'm driving my car on a Monday afternoon along the Monash Freeway on my way to pick up my son from school. Somewhere else, schools are being bombed. I turn up the volume. Jimmy Barnes is singing 'Flame Trees'. The boy that I saw on the news with his belly gutted looks like my son. I try to sing out loud: *And there's nothing else could set fire to this town.* But the sound doesn't come out. My cousin Lubna is protectively holding her children under the kitchen sink. My throat is dry. The building collapses. But she's alive. My throat is shutting down. I can't breathe. I pull over to the side of the road. The cars speed past but I can't see them. Jimmy Barnes is singing but I can barely hear him. I sob. I see bombs falling on the Monash Freeway. I hear explosions. I repeat I'm not in Gaza. I'm not in Gaza. I'm not in Gaza. I get off the highway. I pull over to the side of the road and take out my laptop. I type[2]:
>
> Gaza inhabits me like anxiety
> she bends and stretches
> filling the spaces around me with her constant presence
> she refuses to be reduced to memories
> or to fit into a clichéd existence
> she insists she is more than childhood recollections
> of my parents teaching me to dip my bread in olive oil and *dokka*
> more than bedtime stories of orange orchards and majestic olive trees
> more than the scent of *meramiah* tea
> and the burning taste of hot chilies in my mouth
> Gaza is more than the loving embrace
> of a thousand and one uncles and aunties
> more than warm *sahlab* on cold winter nights
> and sweet crushed ice in the summer breeze
> more than streets named after martyrs
> and heartbroken houses
> crammed in refugee camps along the sea
> more than gentle faces I love
> smiles and *zaghrootas* at greetings

[2] A version of the poem and passage that follow, written by this researcher (Samah Sabawi) were published on Middle East Eye January 2019: 'Reflections on Nakba by a Palestinian Trapped Outside the Cage' https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/reflections-nakba-palestinian-trapped-outside-cage

and endless tears at goodbyes
Gaza is more than the sum of her parts
but all of her parts are a part of me

'Gaza inhabits me like anxiety'. How could I be so traumatised by a place I've never lived in? It is deep and personal experiences such as this that have prompted and guided my research.

Autoethnography, like other genres of self-narrative such as memoir and autobiography, uses the form of storytelling in order to offer and engage in self-reflexivity and cultural analysis and interpretation (Chang, 2008). Bochner and Ellis define autoethnography as 'an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural' (2016, p. 65). While writing from the standpoint of being a Palestinian-Australian, I offer reflection and analysis within the context of the larger cultural and social collective Palestinian experience of exile and dispossession.

While my lived experience as a Palestinian-Australian alone does not make me an expert on the complex topic of what it means to each individual person to be a Palestinian-Australian, it does locate me into the world that I am exploring and situates me within a place where I can begin my inquiry. Theorist Dorothy Smith (1992) highlights the importance of lived experience as it positions the knower within the active discourse and the social relations that are crucial for the subject of inquiry. Being Palestinian-Australian gives me intimate knowledge and facilitates my ability to examine and reflect on the impact of my immediate world's social, political and ideological values. Anderson (2006) warns that while using self-narrative in order to develop and refine 'generalised' theoretical concepts, it is imperative to avoid 'self-absorbed digressions', as the researcher battles deeply personal issues and life events. I'm not only writing about my experiences, but I'm reflecting on those experiences, as an insider researcher, in order to understand how they may have shaped my Palestinian-Australian identity.

My research position corresponds to Anderson's five key features of autoethnographic research: to be a full member of the world that is being explored; to engage in analytic reflexivity; to be visible within the narrative; to transcend the self; and finally, to commit to theoretical analysis (Anderson, 2006, p. 378). My speaking position within this project is thus informed by the following elements. I am a Palestinian-Australian with first-hand knowledge and experience within the cultural social field that I am researching. I am fully aware of the relationship I have with the world I am researching, and the reciprocal impact in this

relationship between this world and myself. I use self-narrative, speaking in the first person, throughout my journey of inquiry, and I step outside of this world I am investigating to engage in critical analysis; my inquiry into what it means to be a Palestinian-Australian and my understanding of myself and my own identity evolves as I make new discoveries along the way. I place my research within the relevant existing theoretical framework and critically analyse both my own position and that of those I am writing about.

Autoethnographical elements within this thesis are placed within a theoretical framework that primarily includes Edward Said's theories on the role of exile in the formation of Palestinian national identity, and Marianne Hirsch's understanding of postmemory (2012) as the inheritance of trauma for second generation survivors who may have never experienced it first-hand. I draw parallels between Hirsch's concept of the 'Guardianship Generation' (Hirsch, 2012) that preserves the memory of the Holocaust, and Said's concept of exile as a source of nourishment of national identity for second generation Palestinian exile (Said, 2001), in order to develop a new conceptual framework; the notion of inhabitation. This notion, ever present in Palestinian cultural discourse, articulates the various ways in which Palestinians feel inhabited by their homeland, by exploring the links between Palestinians in exile and their imagined and real connection to Palestine, and to their Palestinian national identity. In doing so, I hope to offer new knowledge and a new contemporary critical perspective on what it means to be a Palestinian, born or raised in exile.

ETHICAL CHOICES AND CHALLENGES

On this journey of self-reflection and autoethnography, I am aware that all research exploring human conduct, regardless of discipline or methodology, has ethical dimensions that must not be ignored. These stories do not 'belong' to me individually, but rather to my family and larger community. There are fundamental questions regarding the rights and obligations of the autoethnographic researcher. Self-narrative does not automatically mean the exclusion of others; in fact, autoethnographic research places the self within a social cultural setting, exploring its relationship with the social and political order that surrounds it. This inevitably requires the presence of others such as family or members of the community who become an integral part of the story being told, even though they are not categorised officially in the same way as the more traditional research participants in the fields of social sciences.

Writing a novel, even when explicitly fictional, does not exonerate the writer from ethical conduct and responsibility. As Cosgrove (2009) contends, the craft of creative writing has real 'ethical implications' and 'notions of truth' that must be diligently researched in order to strive to live up to the responsibility of creating a believable world, while ensuring where possible the rights of the communities or individuals linked to it.

In this project, I have understood this ethical responsibility to involve being aware of the inevitable tension between, on the one hand, my commitment as a writer and a researcher to investigate and reflect critically on social and political truths and, on the other, my obligation to do no harm to family and community. I have stayed away, where possible, from referencing very personal and potentially harmful private family information that does not add to the overall story I'm researching, and where possible, created fictional characters to carry the weight of such private and potentially harmful information. I have endeavoured to ensure accurate representation of the historic timeline, relevant events, conditions and environment of the Palestinian journey into exile, taking great care not to cause harm to my father, who has entrusted me with his stories, or to the larger community whose experiences I am documenting.

I have over 60 hours of video interviews with my father in 47 separate recordings. All video interviews are numbered. I have used my bilingual fluency in both Arabic and English to transcribe all the interviews into English and I use a variety of resources for cross-referencing and fact-checking my father's oral testimony, his subjective data, with what is considered to be objective data (such as official UN documents, newspaper reports, books by Israeli and Palestinian historians) to ensure accurate historic context.

In writing the novel as part of this research, I kept in mind that 'our primary obligation is always to the people we study, not to our project or discipline' (Denzin,1989, p. 83). Therefore, although there are perhaps not enough clear ethical guidelines specifically targeting human participants in creative writing or autoethnographic research, I follow the recommendation by Tolich (2010) that researchers working with these subjective research methods should follow the *Position Statement on Qualitative Research and IRBs* (Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, 2007) in order to afford their human participants, the same rights as in any qualitative research. This offers ethical guidelines and considerations for researchers using methods that are 'evocative, emotionally engaging, and more subjective' (Tolich, 2010, p. 4).

During the writing of the novel, I have encountered difficult practical and structural decisions. I have sought to balance my responsibility as a writer channelling the voice and testimony of my father, and the collective experience and history of the Palestinian people, with a commitment toward inclusivity and the avoidance of offence. This was difficult to balance at times. For example, when I wrote about the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian village, Salamah, I struggled with writing the following passage:

> 'This is our house,' Aziza shouted. She crushed pistachios, mixed them with cinnamon and sprinkled them on top of the thick dessert. The night before, she saw the massacres in her sleep. Women, children and men slaughtered and piled into corpses then paraded on trucks. She woke up screaming and ran outside and she saw the lines of cars leaving. Some people took furniture others ran barefooted in fear. They locked their houses and took their keys, 'Run Aziza! The Jews are on their way' her neighbour screamed. 'This is our house!' Aziza could not run.'

Should I have used 'Israelis' or 'Zionists' in place of 'the Jews' within the context of that story? The attacks of the Jewish gangs with the purpose of forcibly removing the Palestinian population in order to create a Jewish state are well documented (Khalidi, 1992), (Masalha, 2012), (Pappe, 2015). To this day, most Palestinians call Israelis, *Yahud* i.e.'Jews' because Israel distinguishes itself as a Jewish state for its Jewish citizens. Palestinians understand that they don't have rights because they are not Jewish. If the words in the mouth of my characters were to be authentic and reflective of these historic truths, I had to write 'the Jews are coming.' I believe my responsibility is to create a world as close as possible to the authenticity and truth of the experience I am documenting and portraying.

There is also a unique complexity in the process of writing which stems from my intimate bond with my father and our strong intellectual connection through poetry, creative writing and political beliefs. At times, it seems inevitable that through the course of exchanges and interviews, the boundary that separates my thoughts, memories and words from his are unintentionally blurred. Pennycook (1996, p. 227) points to this generalised dilemma, urging academia to understand authorship in terms of the complex relationship that exists between actual text, memory, and learning. The question of who owns a story or an idea can be difficult to settle in the field of humanities in general, but being conscious of this through my journey of inquiry was important as a first step toward ensuring that great care was taken to identify and acknowledge where my father's thoughts, ideas, stories and voice end and where mine

begin. Crediting my father for his original thoughts and contributions and ensuring I have his full informed consent to tell his stories are issues of integrity and ethical conduct that are part of the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research* (2007). I have also complied with the ethical requirements for authorship as based on the internationally accepted Vancouver Protocols (Morris, 2010).

During the course of writing both my autoethnography and the novel, I have considered it imperative to ensure that participants don't feel obliged to or manipulated or coerced into giving their consent, and that they don't face a risk of exposing confidences both externally, to outsiders or internally to members of the same family or community group. In addition to following those guidelines, I also practiced what Ellis (2007) refers to as 'process consent',by offering periodic updates to my father during the various stages of the research in order to ensure continued informed and voluntary consent.

In the next section, I will explore Linda Tuhiwai Smith's contention that the 'worst excesses of colonialism' continues to be present in the minds of the world's colonised peoples, as well as within the power structures of Western academic institutions (2012). I will also illustrate, the many ways in which these links contribute toward propagating inaccurate and at times racist portrayals of the Palestinian people both in the diaspora as well as in Palestine, producing knowledge that is implicated in facilitating, justifying and maintaining the oppression and colonisation of the Palestinian people.

2 - INVADERS' FEARS OF MEMORIES

'We have on this earth what makes life worth living:
April's hesitation
the aroma of bread at dawn
a woman's point of view about men
the works of Aeschylus
the beginning of love
grass on a stone
mothers living on a flute's sigh
and the invaders' fears of memories'
Mahmoud Darwish (2003, p.6)

Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish's eloquent reference to invaders fearing 'memories' (Darwish, 2003, p.6), poignantly speaks to the Palestinian ongoing struggle to safeguard memory in the face of daily acts of Israeli violence that aims to erase our history and our links to the land. This violence would not have been possible without the complicity of Western power structures, and especially Western academia. In his 1978 book, *Orientalism*, a foundational text for postcolonial studies, the late Palestinian American academic Edward Said argues that early scholarly writing from America and Europe was misleading in its presentation of stereotypical and inaccurate depictions of the East which hinders the true understanding of its cultures and also enables the exploitation of its resources. Said (1978, p. 47) makes the point that such stereotypes were deliberate and vital for the West, serving not only as a 'rationalisation of colonial rule', but also as a means to 'justify' it in advance by painting a picture of an Eastern world that needed to be rescued, civilised and cultured.

Said's writing on the theory on Orientalism was sparked by the western media coverage of the Arab Israeli war, as well as his own personal life and experiences as a Palestinian-American. In a 1998 video interview (Jhally, Talreja and Smith, 1998), he speaks of the great disparity between the representations of Arabs and Palestinians in most scholarly works, and his own lived experience as a Palestinian and an Arab. These representations created fixed images of a stagnant un-developing region, an Arab world that is frozen in time and 'falls outside of history' (Jhally, Talreja and Smith, 1998). It was a world which he, as an Arab who grew up in that region, did not recognise, but one that was necessary for the creation of an oppositional 'Other' for Europe. As Said contends; '… Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of

reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, "us") and the strange (the Orient, the East, "them")' (Said, 1978, p. 43).

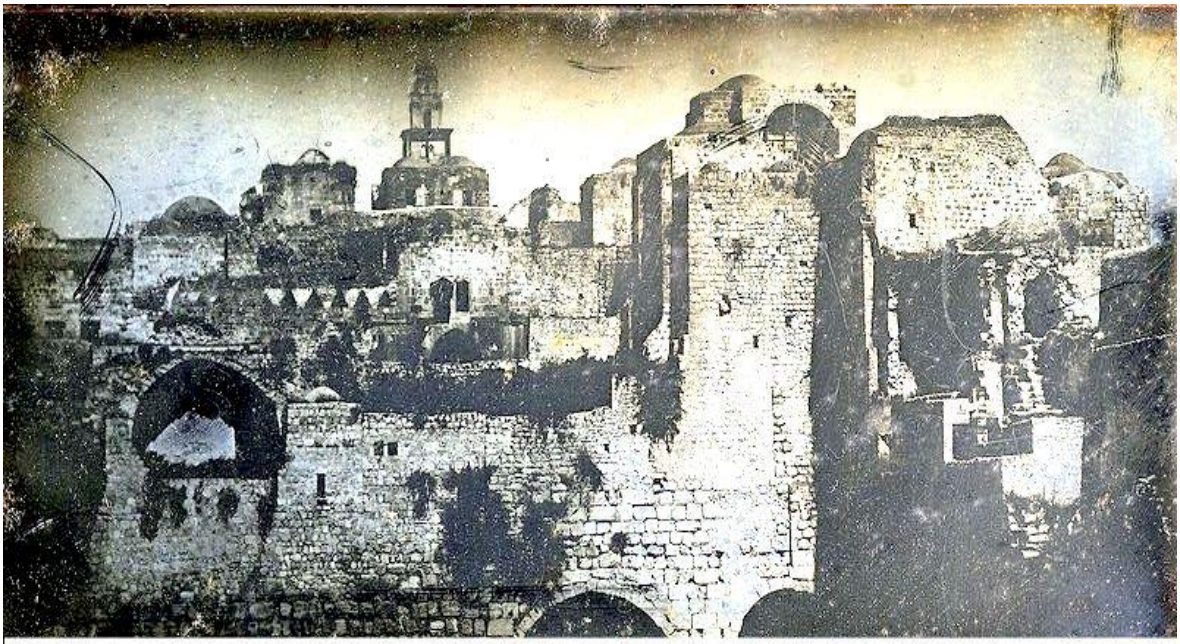
Said (1978) defines Orientalism as both research and writings about the Orient from a particular Western-focused perspective that presents itself as objective knowledge, but which is driven largely by the impetus to support and maintain a discourse of racial superiority and colonial/imperial interests. For example, American Orientalism, according to Said, is ideologically driven and highly politicised in order to support America's interests in the oil resources of the Middle East as well as in propping up its ally, Israel; 'a Jewish state and a Western state, self-declared in the middle of the Islamic oriental world' (Jhally, Talreja and Smith, 1998). Seeing the Palestinians through an Orientalist lens makes it impossible to understand the context of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, yet for decades, as I will go on to illustrate in this chapter, this was the only perspective on offer for Western scholars, and unfortunately, this perspective still persists in much of Western academia.

According to Elia Zureik (1977), studies done by Arab researchers in pre-1948 Palestine were limited and did not match the 'output of experienced Zionist writers' who came from European countries to colonise Palestine, a fact that did not seem to register with western researchers (Zureik, 1977, p. 5). Zureik argues that in Western academia, the works of active Zionist writers such as Granott and Gruenbaum, who occupied influential positions in the Jewish Agency in charge of the colonisation of Palestine, were considered as 'the authentic interpretation of Palestinian society' (Zureik, 1977, p. 5). He writes, 'Mannheim's notion of the socially unattached, free floating intellectual is of questionable validity, particularly when examined in the context of the plethora of Zionist-Western writings on Palestine.' Such writing, he argues, often attempted to interpret cultural and psychological aspects of Palestinian society without accounting for the 'retarding impact of Zionism and British imperialism on Palestinian social development' (Zureik, 1977, p. 5).

The Palestinian historian of photography, Issam Nassar (2003) also identifies the bias of European (and American) photographers as early as 1839, a point of view that produced images of biblical sites in Palestine but ignored the people, towns and villages around those sites. He argues that the absence of the Palestinian population in those early photographs reflects their absence, as a people, from the 'mind and consciousness of the European or American photographers' (Nassar, 2003, p. 149). Nassar views this as a deliberate attempt to 'cleanse'

the Holy Land from any historic connections that may not fit within a Judeo-Christian narrative. He argues that while it took time, Palestinians eventually began to make their way into photographs and '*carte de visite*' - but only as either characters who fitted into an exotic Orientalist fantasy such as Sheiks, Harems etc., or as biblical characters in full costumes. This, Nassar argued, was further proof of the deliberate attempt to remove the Palestinians from history and place them within a context more relative to the West.

As Zionism began to grow as a political movement in the late 19th century, the representation of Palestine without its indigenous inhabitants became a 'trademark of the Zionist imagination' (Nassar, 2003, p. 149). By the early 1900s, the Zionist movement adopted the slogan, 'A Land without a People for a People without a Land' (Said, 1992, p. 9). This striking ability to see the land and not its people is not unfamiliar in the history of imperial wars and conquests. In fact, in Australia, a similar phrase was used – *Terra Nullius* – meaning a land that belongs to no one, to justify the British invasion and dispossession of the indigenous Aboriginal population (Reynolds, 1981).



Jerusalem1844 captured by French photographer Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey

Israeli writer Ari Shavit in his book *My Promised Land* (2013) describes a moment that took place in the late 1800s, more than half a century before Israel was established, when his great-grandfather visited Palestine, and stood on top of the white tower in the vibrant and well-populated Palestinian city of Ramla, surveying the land. Shavit writes:

> ‘My great-grandfather… now standing atop the white tower, he does not see the nearby Palestinian town of Lydda. He does not see the Palestinian village of Haditha, the Palestinian village of Gimzu, or the Palestinian village of El-Kubbab. My great-grandfather does not see, on the shoulder of Mount Gezer, the Palestinian village of Abu Shusha. How can this be, I ask myself in another millennium.’ (Shavit, 2013, p.12)

The villages which Shavit’s grandfather did not see were amongst the 675 Palestinian villages and towns that were later ethnically cleansed of their inhabitants in order to establish a Jewish state (Abu-Sitta, 2007). More than 750,000 Palestinians were uprooted (UNWRA, n.d.), their homes and land confiscated, their legal right to return denied. For decades that followed, the trauma of the Palestinians and their dispossession and displacement was absent from the Western discourse and from Western academic research. And while Western nations celebrated Israel’s establishment every year, the Palestinians commemorated what they call *al-Nakba*, the catastrophe of 1948.

Anthropologist Rosemary Sayigh notes that *al-Nakba* is ‘ever newly present’ (2013, p. 56). It is more than a fading memory of the traumatic past; rather, it ‘continually generates new disasters, voiding the present of any sense of security, and blacking out the future altogether’ (2013, p. 56). For Sayigh, as well as many other Palestinians, the phrase most commonly used now is *al -Nakba al-mustamirah*, meaning the ongoing *al-Nakba*.

The *al-Nakba al-mustamirah* manifests itself in the ongoing attempt at silencing our voices while targeting our history and culture. Palestinian society prior to Israel’s establishment in 1948 was highly developed commercially, artistically and culturally. According to Hanan Ashrawi (2012), Palestine’s economic development was one of the highest in the Arab world and its high school enrolment was second highest, with 379 private schools as early as 1914. Ashrawi also points out that between 1911 and 1948, Palestine had at least 161 newspapers, magazines and other publications and a vibrant cultural scene with cinemas, live theatres and musical concerts both by local artists as well as visiting giants like Egyptian iconic singer Umm Kulthum and Lebanese singer Farid Al-Atrash (Negotiations Affairs Department, n.d). All of this was disrupted in 1948 when Israel was established on the ruination of Palestinian society.

British, and later Israeli authorities, often targeted not only Palestinian political leaders, but also artists and intellectuals imprisoning them, banishing them into exile, and even

assassinating them. Amongst the artists and intellectuals assassinated by Israel were Ghassan Kanafani, Majed Abu Sharar and Kamal Nasser (Abukhalil, 2017) as well as poet and intellectual Wael Zuaiter (Jacir, 2007). Also, as mentioned in the previous section, during Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 Israeli forces looted and confiscated the accumulated national archives of the Palestine Liberation Organization, which included valuable and rare collections of films and other Palestinian cultural artefacts (Institute for Middle East Understanding, 2012). Cultural items and symbols are conduits to people's history, memories and stories. For this reason, the practice and experience of culture, in the war on the Palestinian people's history, has become highly politicised and utilised both as weapon of resistance as well as weapon of erasure.

THE ABSENCE OF AL-NAKBA IN THE 'TRAUMA GENRE'

After more than 70 years of dispossession, the UN estimates there are now over five million Palestinian refugees who are still stateless in refugee camps, most of them ravaged by wars in Syria, Lebanon and in the occupied territories (UNWRA, 2017). Palestinians in Gaza are under a 12 year siege that has been described by UN experts as 'illegal' (Reuters, September 14, 2011) and that has resulted in what the UN calls 'desperate humanitarian conditions' (United Nations, 2018). In the West Bank, Palestinians are under direct Israeli military rule and suffer daily incursions, arbitrary arrests, home demolitions, land confiscations, travel restrictions and violence (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Palestinians who are citizens of Israel have more than 50 laws of discrimination aimed against them (Institute for Middle East Understanding, 2011). The Palestinian communities around the world, and here in Australia, many of whom have experienced some of these traumatic events first hand, are perpetually consumed with fear and hope for their loved ones who are still trapped within this matrix of daily suffering. My family and I have experienced trauma many times, as we helplessly watched from afar, bombs falling where loved ones live, and as we continue to collectively experience the erasure of our voices and our narrative.

During the 2009 bombardment of Gaza, my daughter, an Australian-born, Canadian-raised young woman who was a year 12 student at the time, wrote a short note that she wanted to read at her school's morning assembly. The school she attended was the best private all-girls high school in Ottawa, Canada. We had enrolled her there to sharpen her feminist and intellectual ideals. Little did we know that there would always be a line drawn on Palestine, no matter what

school she attended. She wrote in her note: ‘Teachers, school staff and dear friends, please send your positive thoughts and prayers to my family. My grandparents, my uncle, aunty and my young cousins live in Gaza. This morning an Israeli bomb blew up a house in their street. We haven’t been able to reach them. I’m worried sick about them. Please pray for their safety.’ The school principal refused to have this statement read unless my daughter removed the word, ‘Israeli’. My daughter refused to do that. She argued back, ‘Bombs don’t just fall from the sky’ and ‘It was an Israeli bomb’. The principal refused to allow it, saying that doing so might upset the Jewish students. My daughter had her first lesson in censorship that day. She asked me to pick her up and cried all the way home. She felt her voice and her concerns were erased. She was deeply traumatised by the war on Gaza and by the incident at school.

The American Psychiatric Association defines trauma as the experiencing and witnessing of ‘an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others, and which involved fear, helplessness, or horror’ (1994). Caruth (1991, p. 181) defined trauma as ‘an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena’. The word *al-Nakba* literally means catastrophe, yet my attempt at finding research literature on *al-Nakba* within the academic trauma research field yielded fewer results than I expected. Most highly cited literature on war and collective trauma exclude any mention of *al-Nakba* or the larger ongoing Palestinian experience of trauma (Sayigh, 2013).

Theoretical conceptualisation of the ‘trauma genre’ peaked in the early 1990s, with studies by theorists such as Caruth (1991), Felman (1991) and Felman and Laub (1992). These studies focused at first on the Holocaust, then expanded to addressing the suffering of people from around the world – except, according to Sayigh (2013), for the suffering of Palestinians. In her detailed critique of these studies, Rosemary Sayigh challenges their claim of ‘universality and inclusiveness’ on the basis of their exclusion of Palestinian suffering, and raises the question of whether the trauma genre sets up ‘cultural frames of reference’ to what is suffering and what is not (Sayigh, 2013), and by extension to who is suffering and who is not.

Sayigh notes that the ‘glaring absence’ of *al-Nakba* within the ‘trauma genre’ in Western academic research is a phenomenon that both reflects and reinforces ‘the marginalisation of

Palestinian claims to justice' (Sayigh, 2013). She proposes two theoretical frameworks to consider when trying to understand this absence. First, she argues that Palestinian suffering falls outside what literary scholar David Morris calls 'moral communities'. Morris (1996) builds on the late philosopher Tom Regan's term 'moral communities' (Regan, 1991) in order to illustrate the ways in which writers often work within exclusive social parameters determined by culture and history. These parameters often do not include stories of suffering of others, who are deemed to fall outside of our defined 'moral community'.

The second framework, according to Sayigh, is Judith Butler's idea that 'forms of racism [which are] instituted and active at the level of perception, tend to produce iconic versions of populations who are eminently grievable, and others whose loss is no loss, and who remain ungrievable' (Butler, 2009, p.24). Sayigh contends that the Palestinian people, as seen through the eyes of Western scholars, are 'ungrievable' populations who fall outside of their 'moral community'. She concludes with the notion that the exclusion of Palestinian suffering from the 'trauma genre' is part of the political and cultural myopia which we see in relation to many aspects that concern Palestine and the Palestinian people (Sayigh, 2013). This myopia is substantially constructed or enabled by the Orientalist and colonialist representations of Palestinians and Arabs. Scholars and researchers have a responsibility to be mindful of the impact of the knowledge they produce and to ask themselves who benefits from such knowledge (Tuhawai Smith, 2012). This question is especially potent when placed within the context of sociological and ethnographic studies conducted in pre-1948 Palestine, in which research was a tool of colonisation and erasure.

The attempt to silence Palestinian voices, and the lack of recognition of Palestinian suffering, amplifies the trauma, and acts in itself as 'a form of oppression' (Taylor et al, 1992). Acknowledgement of the wrongs of the past and validation of the scars we bear are essential for redemption and reconciliation. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the former Chairman of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the post-apartheid era, points out that the process of forgiveness 'requires acknowledgement on the part of the perpetrator that they have committed an offence' (Tutu, n.d.). Ours is a twentieth century collective trauma on a national scale, which has gone largely unrecognised or ignored and thus for which no-one has taken responsibility; this lack of visibility contributes to the ongoing nature of the suffering and the difficulty in any progress toward healing.

A new generation of Palestinian and non-Palestinian academics have undertaken a process of challenging and transgressing what Morris (1996, p. 40) refers to as 'the boundaries of a moral community', but often still we see there is a high price to pay. Recognising Palestinian suffering is also recognising Israel's transgressions and violations of rights and laws, a position long viewed as being anti-Israeli and thereby, falsely linked to being anti-Semitic.

Marcy Jane Knopf-Newman believes there is a 'censorship' operative within academic institutions which has led at least two professors, Dr. Norman Finkelstein of DePaul University and Joseph Massad of Columbia University, to suffer grave consequences and lose their jobs, for criticising Israel in their research (Knopf-Newman, 2008). A more recent high-profile cases is that of Steven Salaita who was offered a professorial position with indefinite tenure at the University of Illinois in 2014, only to have the offer rescinded following some tweets he posted that were viewed as having an anti-Israel tone (Lubet, 2017). Salaita fought the university, citing academic freedom. Fifteen months later, after a long legal battle that drew international attention, Salaita accepted a financial settlement of $875,000, but was not reinstated at the university (Cohen, 2015). In 2017, Salaita announced on Facebook that despite applying for many academic jobs on four continents, his applications were inevitably blocked by 'management', and that he was now leaving academia, and refusing to 'tolerate the indignities of a blacklist.'

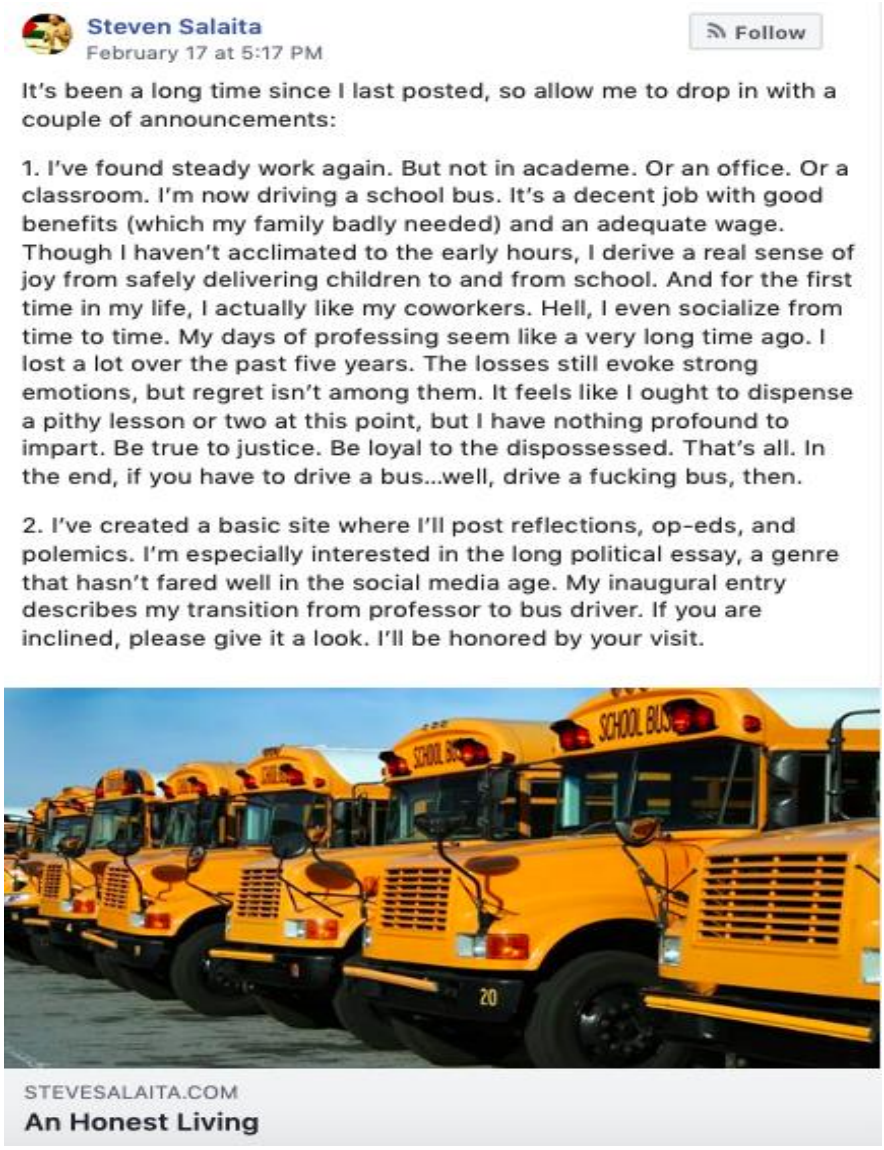
Steven Salaita
July 23, 2017 ·

A few thoughts on leaving academe:

Next week, I will depart Beirut and return to the DC area. I'm grateful to the students and friends who made our time in Lebanon so rewarding. We'll remember this period with great fondness. My son grew from a toddler into a little boy in Beirut. His first memories are registered at AUB.

Despite applying to positions on four continents, I was unable to find an academic job, so I no longer count myself among the professoriate. A number of colleagues have attempted to recruit me, but their efforts always get shut down by management. In turn, I often feel like I'm reliving the UIUC fiasco, which isn't conducive to the kind of mood I prefer to inhabit. I'm easygoing, but I refuse to tolerate the indignities of a blacklist.

Perhaps what Salaita calls a ‘blacklist’ is what Said referred to more than thirty years earlier as a ‘disciplinary communications apparatus’ that overlooks anything that could present Israel in a negative light while punishing those ‘who try to tell the truth’ (Said, 1984, p.30). Salaita’s punishment was swiftly meted out. In a more recent post in 2019 he told his followers on Facebook that he is now making ‘an honest living’ as a school bus driver. Reflecting on lessons learned from his painful experience, he wrote, ‘Be true to justice. Be loyal to the dispossessed. That’s all. In the end, if you have to drive a bus…well, drive a fucking bus, then’.



3 – PERMISSION TO NARRATE … STILL …

‘Facts do not at all speak for themselves, but require a socially acceptable narrative to absorb, sustain and circulate them. Such a narrative has to have a beginning and end: in the Palestinian case, a homeland for the resolution of its exile since 1948’
(Said, 1984, p. 34).

In his famous essay, ‘Permission to Narrate’ (1984), Edward Said argues that despite images of ‘Israel’s brutality’ and ‘savage’ behaviour during the 1982 siege of Beirut, a campaign by pro-Zionist groups attacking the media and accusing it of a pro-PLO slant succeeded in silencing criticism of Israel within mainstream media outlets. The campaign, according to Said (1984), included running pro-Israel commentaries and policy studies, both before and after the Israeli invasion, in publications like the *New Republic*, as well regular lectures in many college campuses on what was alleged to be a ‘misrepresentation’ of Israel’s war in Lebanon. In his essay, Said illustrates how pro-Zionist groups not only objected to the analogy used by the media linking Beirut to Nazi-controlled Warsaw, but also to the broadcasts of images or videos of Israeli troops bombing plainly civilian targets. The very few news outlets that did not bend to the wishes of those Zionist groups were swiftly labelled anti-Semitic. In Said’s words, it was as if ‘the millions of feet of newsreel are less trustworthy than the impressions of a supporter of Israel who spent a day in Lebanon touring the place as a guest of the Israeli Army’ (Said, 1984, p.35).

More than thirty years since Said wrote this essay, Palestinians are still asking for permission to narrate their own lives and experiences. This chapter will build on Edward Said’s *Permission to Narrate* essay and draw on my personal experiences within the battleground for voice and inclusion within the public sphere, in order to offer contemporary critical analysis of the challenges Palestinians still face today in presenting their narrative within the wider mainstream media and public platforms. The chapter will also look at the ways in which representations of Palestinians and the Palestinian/Israeli conflict within the media impact our sense of identity and belonging and contribute toward our understanding of who we are as Palestinian-Australians.

As I reflect on the challenges I've experienced first-hand in presenting the Palestinian narrative to the wider public, and the hyperbolic reaction that often seems to follow inclusion of my voice in conversations within the mainstream, I'm reminded of Edward Said's words: 'When an attempt is made to speak critically of Israel, the result is frightening – if the attempt succeeds in getting any diffusion at all' (Said, 1984). In 2014, a controversy erupted when the Wheeler Centre, a Melbourne centre for writing and culture, was pressured by Zionist groups in Victoria into disinviting me from a panel on the Israel/Palestine conflict, despite my being one of only two Palestinians on that panel – the other four were Jewish and two of them were Israelis. It seemed that even an asymmetric power balance that favoured the pro-Israel side, was not enough to compel Zionist groups to accept my presence on that platform. As a result of this pressure, and only hours after my name was added to the event page on the Wheeler Centre website, I received the following email informing me that I was being removed from the panel:

Sent: Tuesday, 20 May 2014 4:16 PM
To: Samah Sabawi
Subject: RE: Wheeler Centre invitation, 10 June

Dear Samah,
I am terribly sorry to write with this news, but I am afraid we have been put in a position where we must either cancel our debate, or replace you as speaker.
We have decided for a number of reasons, to continue with the debate, albeit one with external constraints, and would like, instead, to invite you to speak at the Wheeler Centre in a separate event. What's the best phone number with which I can call you to discuss?
Apologies,

My name was promptly taken down from the event page, triggering outrage on social media. Within hours, the controversy made the pages of *The Age* in Australia (Carey, 2014) and *Ha'aretz* in Israel (Goldberg, 2014). Facing tremendous pressure from the Australian public who has no appetite for censorship, the Wheeler Centre cancelled the entire debate and replaced it with a new event in which I was the first to be invited. Three panelists from the original debate refused to join the new one; Dr. Izzat Abdel Hadi, Ambassador at the General Delegation of Palestine to Australia, Dvir Abramovich, B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation Commission Chair, and Geoffrey Bloch, Israeli activist and barrister. The new event went

ahead with a new panel which also consisted of only two Palestinians, myself and Palestinian-Australian Fairfax journalist Maher Mughrabi, along with four Jewish and Israeli speakers.

Later that year, during Israel's fifty-one day bombing campaign of the small and besieged Israel-occupied Gaza strip, I submitted a number of opinion pieces to major Australian news outlets, in the hope that my voice would lend context to the daily images of horror we viewed on our television screens and in our newsfeed, and that it would balance the daily barrage of pro-Israel commentaries and opinions. My efforts did not yield results. The opinion pieces I submitted were either met with silence or I was told, 'sorry no space'.

It wasn't until the last phase of the Gaza bombing campaign that I finally convinced SBS World News to do a story by pitching my personal connection to family in Gaza, and suggesting that we might be able to Skype with them. During the interview, I spoke at length about the context of the Gaza war, the impact of Israel's siege and occupation and what we should be doing in Australia to ensure that all parties respect and abide by international humanitarian laws. In the end when the report aired, none of that came through. Instead, Australian viewers were presented with footage of me looking at my computer screen, seemingly emotional as I spoke to my cousin in Gaza, as well as an interview with an Israeli couple in Sydney whose daughter went on a birth-right trip to Israel. The message was that 'both sides' were equally worried about loved ones in the conflict zone. Never mind that there was not one death reported in Tel Aviv at the time as a result of this 'conflict' and more than two thirds of Gaza was reduced to rubble. This poor attempt at being even-handed was infuriating to say the least. None of my analysis was aired. No context was allowed. It was clear that the media was guarding the

Zionist narrative both explicitly, and implicitly, by excluding what Said in 1984 called the 'humble narrative of native Palestinians once resident there' (Said, 1984, p.36).

The understood parameters of the space Palestinians are allowed within the Australian public sphere is either as angry terrorists or helpless victims, but rarely, if ever, as rational analysts and narrators of their own stories. Coverage of the 'human story' during Israel's bombardment of Gaza in 2014 consisted of footage of the dead and dying, accompanied by short sound bites of concerned and crying relatives. When we insisted on expressing our political views, contextualising the footage, asking for equal time as the pro-Israel voices or on challenging the language the media adopted in covering the conflict, we were often met with polite silence and/or cold rejection. It appears not much has changed since 1982 when Israel's invasion of Lebanon brought Palestinian refugees into the spotlight, but as Said notes, '[Palestinians] are there all right, but the narrative of their present actuality – which stems directly from the story of their existence in and displacement from Palestine, later Israel – that narrative is not' (Said, 1984, p. 30).

A study conducted by Han and Rane (2011) on the Australian press and public opinion on the Palestine Israel conflict concluded, after analysing 10,000 articles published by *The Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, that both newspapers frequently mentioned Palestinian refugees 'without any historical context or explanation of how they became refugees in the first place'. The study also found there were almost no articles mentioning the Palestinian *al-Nakba*, or any of the events that lead to the dispossession of the Palestinian people. Although to date, there is no scientific data on the representation of Palestinian voices within the Australian media, a comparable report by Punditfact on CNN coverage of the war on Gaza concluded that Israeli officials speaking on the Gaza bombing campaign outnumbered their Palestinian counterparts by more than four-to-one (Qiu and Sanders, 2014).

There have been many studies and books exploring the ways in which international news outlets and correspondents may be guilty of perpetuating this imbalance in reporting from Palestine/Israel, they include the works of Deprez & Raeymaeckers (2010), Hannerz (2007), and more recently in Australia, Lyons (2017) and Manning (2018). It is worth mentioning that while reporters in Australia often express to me privately their support and sympathy with

Palestinians, almost all indicate a fear of tackling the issue publicly in any way that would tip the balance of power. On ABC Radio, a broadcaster who invited me to speak on his show about art and theatre begged me not to bring up the ongoing war on Gaza. He told me he 'wept' for the Palestinians, but he didn't want to talk about it on air: 'I don't want to lose my job,' he said with teary eyes. The expectation was that I, the Palestinian with family under the falling bombs, would offer him comfort by showing my understanding of his silence. It was an ironic and almost cruel state of affairs.

A few months later, the ABC's *Q&A* television program invited me to be on their panel, but less than 24 hours later, they rescinded the invitation. The producer sent me a text message apologising. In the text, she wrote that even though the producers and Tony Jones were keen on having me on the panel, their decision was 'vetoed in editorial'.

In 2016, I found myself at the centre of yet another controversy as a campaign to remove my play, *Tales of a City by the Sea* from the Victorian Certificate of Education Drama playlist triggered debate in the halls of the Victorian State Parliament (Waters, 2016). The Victorian Opposition 'used a budget hearing to attack the Government' over the inclusion of what they claimed was an 'anti-Israel' play (Anderson, 2016) on the VCE curriculum. This made my modest piece of independent theatre, a Palestinian love story set in Gaza, amongst the few, if any, independent theatre productions to be debated in state parliament. For days, while the controversy raged, I was talked about but never talked to.

Fortunately, the play remained on the VCE curriculum and sold out its entire season before going on a national and international tour. When I finally responded to the accusation levelled at me in an opinion piece that was published in *The Age*, I wrote, 'The problem with this play is not that it may dehumanise Israelis – it does not. The problem is it humanises the Palestinians. Apparently, for some, this is too much to handle' (Sabawi, 2016).

What I had experienced was case in point of Israel's attack on Palestinian culture which continues to take many different shapes and forms. Palestinian artists in the occupied and besieged West Bank and Gaza suffer the same fate as all other Palestinians living under occupation. They are discriminated against, their movement is restricted, and their most basic human rights are denied. My own personal experience leads me to believe that Palestinian cultural workers in exile are also constantly targeted by pro-Israel groups. Efforts to remove my play from the VCE playlist in Australia was only part of a larger effort globally to suppress the Palestinian narrative and prevent Palestinian voices from being heard.

MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE PALESTINIAN-AUSTRALIAN IDENTITY

The inclusion of Palestinian voices within Australia's public sphere is both a validation of our right to be heard as Australians, and a recognition of our identity and narrative as Palestinians. The Australian in me is outraged every time the Palestinian in me is silenced. Yet in the few occasions that I was able to engage with the media, I was frequently 'Othered' as the Palestinian and not the Australian writer. A perfect illustration of this was a conversation I had on air with Rafael Epstein on ABC radio's The Drive on (Epstein, 2014):

Samah Sabawi:	*We need political solutions. If they can't work it out on their own that's when the international community needs to step in and to play a positive role. Our government for one is not playing a positive constructive role.*
Rafael Epstein:	*You mean the Palestinian Authority…*
Samah Sabawi:	*No. Our government. The Australian government.*

Mr. Epstein, who I believe should be commended for being one of the very few journalists with the moral courage to invite a Palestinian-Australian on his show, unintentionally Othered me. In his defense, identities are complex, and how we perceive the identities of others passes through many social, political and religious filters. In Australia's multicultural society, most of

us identify with various religious, nationalistic, ideological affiliations. I am a Palestinian, Australian, Canadian, Muslim, secular, woman of colour, mother, playwright, daughter etc… It is the combination of all my identity affiliations that make-up who I am. But it is my Palestinian identity, the part of me, that is most under attack, that seem to define who I am, at least in public platforms. As Amin Maalouf argues, 'People often see themselves in terms of whichever one of their allegiances is most under attack' (Maalouf, 2000, p. 22).

Identities are also shaped both by recognition and the absence of recognition. As Taylor et al (1992) suggests, people can suffer real damage 'if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves' (Taylor et al, 1992). Palestinians are no strangers to this predicament. For example, in 2017, New South Wales Police released footage (Rizk and Kassoua, 2018) of a counter-terrorist training exercise conducted at Sydney's Central railway station. The 'fake terrorists' in the training footage wore the Palestinian headscarf as they acted a scene where they ran through Central Station stabbing and shooting innocent bystanders. An uproar on SBS Arabic 24's Facebook page later forced the NSW policy to offer an apology. We associate the Palestinian national symbol, the headscarf or *Keffiyeh*, with Palestinian resistance. Having this cultural symbol of political resistance used to reinforce a negative stereotype of Australian-Palestinians by linking them with terrorists who stab innocent civilians while chased by the Australian police – *our* police, in *our* country of Australia – was the ultimate experience in 'Othering'.

The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (2015) estimates there are 12.37 million Palestinians in the world. Of those, 4.75 million live under Israeli military rule in the Occupied Territories, almost half as internally displaced persons or refugees. There are also 1.47 million Palestinians residing inside Israel, 5.46 million Palestinians living in Arab countries and 685,000 scattered around the world. The largest Palestinian communities outside of the Arab world are in Latin America, the US and in Europe (Hammer and Schulz, 2005). But when it comes to the number of Palestinians in Australia, it is difficult to assess exact numbers through official records.

Until 2001, the Australian census did not collect information on ancestry, without which the Palestinian population was invisible from official data. 'The majority of Palestinians arrived on passports issued by the countries to which they were displaced. Many families divided by war held passports from different countries.' (Immigration Museum, 2009). This lack of access

to official data had an impact on social science research that tried to target the Palestinian-Australian community. For example, when Cox and Connell (2003) wrote a study exploring identity and exile within the context of first-generation Palestinian diaspora, they noted the challenges they encountered in finding related research as well as in finding Palestinian subjects to interview. One of the challenges they mention is the 'invisibility' of Palestinians in the official data such as the Census which usually collects information on birthplace, country or nationality (Cox and Connell, 2003).

Palestinian-Australians are, by virtue of their history and experience, diverse and multicultural; by the time they arrive in Australia many have already lived in other countries outside of Palestine and have acquired other languages, dialects, and cultures and in some cases, even nationalities. My parents came to Australia from Saudi Arabia, carrying Jordanian travel documents. My younger brothers and sister were born in Saudi Arabia, my children were born in Canada and my husband had an Egyptian travel document. I have American, Canadian, Bulgarian, French, English and Spanish first cousins.

Cox and Connell used the method of snowball sampling, relying on word of mouth, to find their Palestinian-Australian subjects. They estimate that at the time of their research, there were between 6,000 to 15,000 Palestinians in Australia, most believed to be in Sydney; described as 'well integrated into Australian society' yet consumed with the idea of 'gaining or reclaiming a Palestinian identity' (2003, p. 340), a sentiment frequently expressed in most research that relates to Palestinians in exile. However, I would argue that the opposite might be true when looking at Palestinian-Australians within the workplace. The story of Zeina in the introduction to this thesis sheds light on the difference between wanting to maintain a national Palestinian identity, and espousing that identity within the work space. That's why Zeina uses a pseudonym on Facebook for her pro-Palestinian posts.

In 2001, the Australian census collected information on ancestry for the first time, estimating that Australia had 7,000 people of Palestinian origin (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004). However, to this day, unless Palestinians choose to identify themselves as such, they remain invisible. This may explain why, when I set out to find Palestinian-Australian authors, online search engines and library catalogues turned up few names, but many more were not listed. For example, novelist Amal Awad, author of *Courting Samira* (2010) and *Beyond Veiled Clichés* (2017*)*, and poet Sara Saleh author of *Wasting the Milk in the Summer* (2016), are mostly

identified online as Arab-Australian writers, not by their Palestinian ancestry. Arwa El Masri, author of *Tea with Arwa: a memoire of family, faith and finding a home in Australia* (2011), was born in Saudi Arabia to Palestinian parents but is often referred to as Saudi writer. Most of the work done by these writers tends to primarily center around issues related to the Arab Australian-Muslim experience, and not specifically to the far more controversial Palestinian experience. And although Leila Chung, author of *Chasing Shadows* (2014), and Ferial Youakim, author of *Beyond Beauty, a refugee's journey in pursuit of happiness* (2017), both deal with stories from Palestine and about the Palestinians, the two authors are identified according to their place of birth as Lebanese-born Australian authors.

On the other hand, award-winning Palestinian-Australian author and academic Dr. Randa Abdel-Fattah identifies as a Palestinian-Australian and has proudly worn the Palestinian national symbol of resistance, the *Keffiyeh*, to an ABC live panel appearance on International Women's Day (Baird, 2018). This triggered a social media storm of Palestinian-Australian jubilation and pride. However, it is worth mentioning that Abdel-Fattah's access to public platforms does not go unpunished. It is often followed by protests and attempts to silence her. For example, in 2018, her appearance on ABC's Q&A panel prompted a heated discussion in Senate Estimates (Parliament of Australia, 2018). The episode which aired after tens of Palestinian unarmed protesters were shot dead and thousands were injured by Israeli snipers, featured a question from a Palestinian-Australian in the audience that infuriated the pro-Israel groups and prompted Senator Abetz to question the ABC's integrity.

Senator Abetz demanded to know 'who selects the questions that go to air,' claiming the question contained 'factual errors' and should not have been allowed to be broadcasted. Senator

Abetz dismissed the fact that Mr Sheridan and Senator Hume on the panel offered a pro-Israel perspective, claiming that wasn't enough given that 'one of the guests on the ABC's Q&A on that night was Randa Abdel-Fattah 'who openly identifies as a Muslim Palestinian.' The Senator then demanded that the ABC provide 'the amount of time that Greg Sheridan was allowed to speak in comparison to the time given to Ms Abdel-Fattah' (Parliament of Australia, 2018).

Abdel-Fattah's access to public platforms is hard won through many years of excruciating work and an extraordinary trail of books and awards that make her voice difficult to ignore. Perhaps she is aware that being identified as a Palestinian comes with the responsibility of representation. 'I know who I am. Most racialised people do,' Abdel-Fattah writes in an opinion piece in the Guardian, as she tears apart the notion of 'white Australia', adding her voice to the many Indigenous and other minority Australian voices who call on Australians to come to terms with this country's violent history of colonisation and racism, and its present policies that divide, marginalise and discriminate against minorities (Abdel-Fattah, 2018). Abel-Fattah insists in her opinion piece that this is the only way to create and imagine a better place for all of us. 'I am the child of the dispossessed,' she writes, 'and I am complicit in dispossession' (Abdel-Fattah, 2018).

Abdel-Fattah's words reflect the confidence of knowing and understanding what life within the hyphen means. As a Palestinian-Australians public figure, she asserts her voice on the land on which she stands, Australia, while always remembering Palestine, the land from where she comes. This is at the heart of the tension that defines our Palestinian and Australian identities. We are both colonised and complicit in the colonisation of others. Identities and loyalties shift as we try to find our place within the hyphen between the two worlds. How do we inherit these contradictory legacies that continue to shape who we are and how we are perceived?

In the next chapter, I will delve deeper into how it is that we inherit our Palestinian legacy, and what it means to be part of a generation that feels a responsibility to be the 'guardians' of Palestine.

4 – THE ‘GUARDIANSHIP’ OF PALESTINE IN THE ‘EXILE MILIEU’

Simone Weil writes that being rooted is ‘the most important and least recognised need of the human soul’ (Weil, 1952, p. 43). Weil explains that we establish roots by belonging to a place, a community, a culture and a history that ‘preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future’ (Weil, 1952, p.43). This process of preservation is often the first casualty when a people are dispossessed and uprooted. Reviving it becomes both a necessity for the survival of those dispossessed, and an obstacle in the process of planting new roots. The hearts of exiles, Weil contends, are so ‘irresistibly turned towards the homeland in distress that few emotional resources are left for friendship for the land they happen to be living in’ (Weil, 1952, p. 205). But this suggestion is a dangerous one to make in the modern world of rising nationalism and racist sentiments. This notion suggests that exiles cannot belong; by extension it suggests that we, as Palestinian-Australians, have few ‘emotional’ resources left to give to our new home in Australia.

I reflect on these words as I think of all the times when my teenage self slammed doors and threw tantrums, accusing my parents of being stuck in Palestine, demanding that they understand we are now in Australia, and we are Australians. I am Australian. I shouldn’t be bound to the customs and beliefs of the past. The teenage me wanted freedom from the heaviness and burden of exile. She saw the world in black and white. She believed she could only be Australian or Palestinian. Never both at once. But these are the immature thoughts of a young teenager. Certainly, exiles do turn toward their homeland, yearn for it, and try to preserve its culture and norms, but they are fully capable of falling in love with and belonging to a new home. Paradoxically, Exile, as Edward Said contends, can have a positive transformative and enriching impact on the formation and nourishment of Palestinian national identity (Said, 2001), but that doesn’t diminish the ability of exiles to acquire and embrace other new and enriching identities.

However, as I will illustrate, Palestinian exile literature often reinforces the idea that adopting any other identity is an act of betrayal to the homeland, and that being in a state of constant estrangement from place and longing for home is the acceptable prevalent condition. Said describes exile as ‘a jealous state’, a condition of ‘estrangement’ and ‘alienation’ that guards its existence in order to establish ‘an exaggerated sense of group solidarity’ and ‘a passionate

hostility to outsiders' (2001, p. 141). I learned growing up that embracing my Palestinian identity is a duty, a conscious political decision, a familial obligation, a minimum gesture of solidarity with loved ones who are still trapped in Israel's occupation.

Raja Shehadeh and Penny Johnson explore ideas of home and exile in *Seeking Palestine* (2012), by asking a number of Palestinian writers to respond to the question of how Palestine is lived and imagined at home and in exile. Palestinian writer Rana Barakat described the burden we carry as second generation exiled: 'Palestine in exile is an idea, a love, a goal, a movement, a massacre, a march, a parade a poem, a thesis, a novel and yes, a commodity, as well as a people scattered, displaced, dispossessed and determined' (Johnson and Shehadeh, 2012, p. 145). This politicised definition of being Palestinian was reflected in the writings of other contributors to *Seeking Palestine*, including by Susan Abulhawa, Suad Amery, Juean Said Makdisi and Karma Nabulsi (Johnson and Shehadeh, 2012).

Language plays an essential role in this politicised process, as Palestinians navigate through social and cultural terrains of identity. Even the use of the term 'diaspora' becomes contentious and subject to interrogation. Hammer and Schulz (2005) argue that diaspora is an enduring dispersed and defused transnational existence, a state whereby one is forced to travel for personal occasions like weddings, family reunions and funerals. In this context, the term appears to fit the condition of the dispersed Palestinians who have endured being away from home for decades.

However, one cannot ignore the voices who reject the use of this term, insisting the only definition for Palestinians outside the homeland is 'exiled'. Edward Said, for example, argues using the term 'diaspora' depoliticises the Palestinian reality of ongoing dispossession inside the homeland, ignores the displaced and refugee populations under Israeli occupation and fails to address the denial of the right to return (Williams, 2009). Said insists that the term 'exile' more accurately describes the condition that has torn millions of Palestinians away from their way of life and tradition and has prevented them from returning.

Said's argument is echoed within the global literature on Palestinian identity in exile. Studies conducted in different parts of the globe looking at the Palestinian identity have come up with almost identical findings. For example, Mavroudi's study in Athens (2007) and Cox and Connell in Australia (2003) came up with the same conclusion; that the Palestinian cause,

alqadyah al felesteenyah, is at the centre of the Palestinian identity. Mavrouodi proposes that Palestinians are driven by a need to construct a nation in exile and in imagination, and so bringing up Palestinians in diaspora becomes part of the 'process of imagining and creating a Palestinian nation where notions of national identity, unity, ethnicity and so forth are actively invoked for political reasons' (Mavroudi, 2007, p. 396-397).

However, while identifying as a Palestinian might be a 'conscious decision' and a 'political' choice for some, I would argue that for the greater majority of Palestinians outside the homeland, being Palestinian is not so much a decision but rather a reflection of who they are. Palestinian mothers labouring over the perfect *Maqluba* while recounting stories of growing up in Palestine are not consciously keeping the cause alive. They are sharing a part of themselves, revealing their past and passing on the treasure trove of knowledge they inherited from past generations. When my sisters got married, my mother did not insist on having a Palestinian wedding to spite the Zionists, or to sing songs as old as the Sycamore tree in her home in Palestine, in order to wipe Israel from the map. She insisted on celebrating in the manner that she knew. This is her reality. Her world. Her memories. And she is Palestinian. When I joined the Debka dance group at the Palestinian Arabic Club in Broadmeadows in my early teens, it wasn't because I read Edward Said's theories on exile and decided to nourish my national identity through dance moves. I did so to socialise with others who shared my interests, who understood what it felt like to grow up in families like mine. This is to say that Palestinian families outside the homeland do not see their Palestinian identity as a political choice but rather as an inescapable part of who they are. What I believe politicises the Palestinian identity is the negation of our right to identify as Palestinian.

Zionists have often made the argument that the Palestinian identity is a fiction that is constructed or created only to destroy Zionism. Israel's fourth Prime Minister, Golda Meir, famously said, 'It was not as if there was a Palestinian people in Palestine and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them. They did not exist' (Yadid, 2015). More recently, Ted Lapkin (2015), the director of Public Affairs for the Zionist Federation of Australia, wrote in an opinion piece for the ABC, 'Simply put, there was never a distinctly Palestinian Arab nation.' He went further to argue: 'The construction of a Palestinian something-from-nothing constitutes the most remarkable triumph of fable over fact in living diplomatic memory' (Lapkin, 2015).

This is the discourse and the environment in which I grew up within my hyphenated identity. There was no Palestine on any of the maps in my high school in Victoria. There was no Palestinian food on any of the menus in restaurants. There were no Palestinian voices or characters in any of the shows or movies on television. There was no mention of Palestinians – only now and then, Arab terrorists bent on destroying Israel. The only place where Palestine existed was in our home, at our dinner table, and within our community.

While Said's argument that exile nourishes the Palestinian identity (2002) is true for the first generation of exiled Palestinians, to understand how a second generation born and raised in Australia can inherit the sense of exile, despite having all the privileges that Australia offers we need to go further. I myself am Canadian-Australian, but I have remained a Palestinian refugee in exile at heart. I constantly feel displaced and dislocated. I joke sometimes that being a Canadian-Australian means that I get to be perfectly Othered in two of the world's greatest counties. Lucky me! So how is it that I've inherited exile?

The works of Marianne Hirsch and her theory of postmemory (2012) offer some answers. While Hirsch's postmemory work focuses on the experience of Holocaust survivors and their descendants, ironically her theorization can readily be applied to Palestinian survivors of war and dispossession. In her book *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After The Holocaust*, Hirsch (2012) wanders through the painful tracks of memories to reveal the effect of trauma on second and third generations born to Holocaust survivors, a trauma experienced by those who have not lived it first-hand. This process of inter-generational memory transmission of vital and significant traumatic events is what Hirsch calls postmemory, using 'post' to signify both distance from, as well as engagement with these past events, seeking to understand our present by acknowledging how it relates to a troubled past (Hirsch, 2012)**.**

Unlike memory, postmemory is not 'mediated by recall' but rather is a product of powerful transmission of 'prevailing dominant narratives' that 'approximates memory in its affective force' to the point where these transmissions 'seem to constitute memories' (2008). Such transmissions are manifested in family culture and social behaviours and passed on through images, stories and objects, shaped and nurtured through dominant familial and social

narratives. Postmemory reconstructs past traumatic events in a way that impacts and shapes the present for postmemory generations.

But for the postmemory generation of Palestinians, whose parents fled or were exiled with only the shirt on their back, as was the case with my family, memory of the past is not reconstructed through objects, but rather through the lack of presence of objects and places. I spent the first ten years of my life in Saudi Arabia, a desert country with endless sand dunes, listening to stories and poetry that described what my parents had left behind in Palestine. These stories and poems fed my imagination and my yearning for a place I didn't know. Most vivid in my 'memory' is our garden in Palestine. My parents spoke about the pomegranate tree, the jasmine bush, the thorny cactus that birthed the sweetest fruit, the sycamore tree, the vegetable garden, a life that seemed so beautiful and full of colour against the backdrop of a Saudi desert city where nothing grew. But this stark contrast only added to the pain of exile, the trauma of a life disrupted, and a family uprooted and grandparents that were left locked behind high walls.

Hirsch explains that postmemory is powered by the need for inclusion in a 'collective membrane' shaped by the 'shared inheritance of multiple traumatic histories' and driven by a sense of social responsibility toward a persisting painful past (2012). We see evidence of this need for inclusion in a 'collective membrane' within the social gatherings of Palestinian community groups in diaspora, for example, during popular annual events in Melbourne, such as the *Run for Palestine* and the *Palestine National Day* celebrations. Such events bring together young and old first, second and third generation Palestinian-Australians who gather to celebrate their shared identity. They paint Palestinian flags on their faces, and dance *debka* in groups, while mouthing the words of traditional Palestinian songs. There is more to these events than the need to celebrate or belong. The speeches often address the need to 'remember' and the responsibility to pass on the cause to the next generation. The national anthem is often met with emotional tears and painful sighs. There is always a reference to the children who will not forget, often following a performance by young second and third generation Palestinian-Australians. During the 2017 National Day celebration in Federation Square, the young children performed *debka* to the popular song *ana dammy falasteeny,* 'my blood is Palestinian.'

Second and third generation Palestinian-Australian children performing ana damy falasteeny (my blood is Palestinian), on Palestine National Day 2017 at Federation Square in Melbourne. All the children are from the Sabawi family. They are my father, Karim Sabawi's great grand children and grand nieces and nephews. My father was the first in the Sabawi family to immigrate in 1980.

Palestinian parents instill in their children the sense of responsibility of safekeeping the memories of Palestine from an early age. This is not done directly or deliberately but through what Hirsch describes as a structure of 'inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience'. Hirsch describes this structure within the context of the post Holocaust generation, identifies herself as being part of a generation that holds the 'guardianship of the Holocaust' (2012), a generation that can 'remember' events that happened to their families before they were born.

Hirsch's idea of holding 'the guardianship of the Holocaust' is not unfamiliar to me. Raised in a Palestinian home, I am accustomed to hearing similar phrases used in poetry, songs and in popular slogans. Pledges such as 'we will not forget', 'we will return', 'Palestine lives within us', and images of elderly refugees handing the key to a home they once owned in Palestine to their grandchildren, are the images that mark the landscape of growing up Palestinian. We, the generation that never lived in Palestine, understand that we are entrusted to keep Palestine alive. The primary modes of the transmission of Palestinian memory – poetry, songs and stories – are part of our daily lives. We are expected, persuaded and at times even commanded to be the 'guardians' of Palestine.

Drawing on the works of key theorists such as Hirsch and Said, a Jew and a Palestinian, explicitly highlights how intertwined these experiences are. It becomes clear that it is difficult to write about the Palestinian experience of trauma and exile, without referencing the Jewish one. This is not to say that the disasters or events that lead to their trauma and exile are comparable, but rather that both Jewish and Palestinian diasporas are victim diasporas, formed in response to experiencing disasters (Hammer and Schulz, 2003). However, in comparing Palestinian and Jewish reactions to trauma, manifested in forms of nationalisms, there are stark results.

Although both Jewish and Palestinian nationalisms are a product of years of exile and alienation, Said argues that Jewish nationalism, in the form of Zionism, was 'a hothouse flower grown from European nationalism, anti-Semitism and colonialism, while Palestinian nationalism derived from the great wave of Arab and Islamic anti-colonial sentiment' (Said, 1982). Although since 1967 Palestinian nationalism began to take on a 'retrogressive religious sentiment,' it has remained located within the mainstream of secular post-imperialist thought (Said, 1982). What I interpret Said to be suggesting here is that Zionism cannot be viewed outside its role as a 'dispossessing movement' for the non-Jewish Palestinian population, while Palestinianism since 1967 has generally been inclusive (Said, 1982). Having made that point, Said captures the connectivity between the two, 'Palestinians feel that they have been turned into exile by the proverbial people of exile, the Jews' (2001, p. 184). Marianne Hirsch also makes this connection as she reflects on Palestinian and Jewish narratives of return in an attempt to explain the elements that construct what she sees as the 'fractured' shapes that characterise our 'impulse to return' (2012, p. 167).

Said and Hirsch's work complement each other. Where Said's theories on exile as experienced by first generation Palestinians end, Hirsch's postmemory work begins by looking beyond that first generation experience at the inheritance of trauma and postmemory and its impact on second and third generation survivors. The traumatic events our families have experienced, in particular the pain of exile which Edward Said has so beautifully and poignantly articulated, have been carried through our Palestinian collective memory. Our own 'memory culture' is encapsulated in objects, images and stories (Hirsch, 2012). They taunt us, appearing like ghosts from the past in embroidered cushions, prayer beads, old house keys, olive trees, poetry and

testimonies. We take upon ourselves the Palestinian experience, whether lived, remembered or imagined, out of the need to belong to what Hirsch describes as a 'collective membrane forged by a shared inheritance of multiple traumatic histories' (Hirsch, 2012, p. 32).

It may be for this reason that Palestinians born and raised outside the homeland might feel an intimate connection to the experiences of their parents, their pain and their sense of forceful dislocation and dispossession. They may even feel an obligation to represent and to capture this pain shaped by 'a desire to repair' (Hirsch, 2012, pp. 33- 34). Perhaps this is why I feel that it is important to capture my father's story of dispossession and exile. We are born from survivors, and we have inherited the knowledge that our parents were lucky to survive. In this sense, our Palestinian identity is on one level a response 'to injustice and a diminished inheritance' (Cox and Connell, 2003, p. 340).

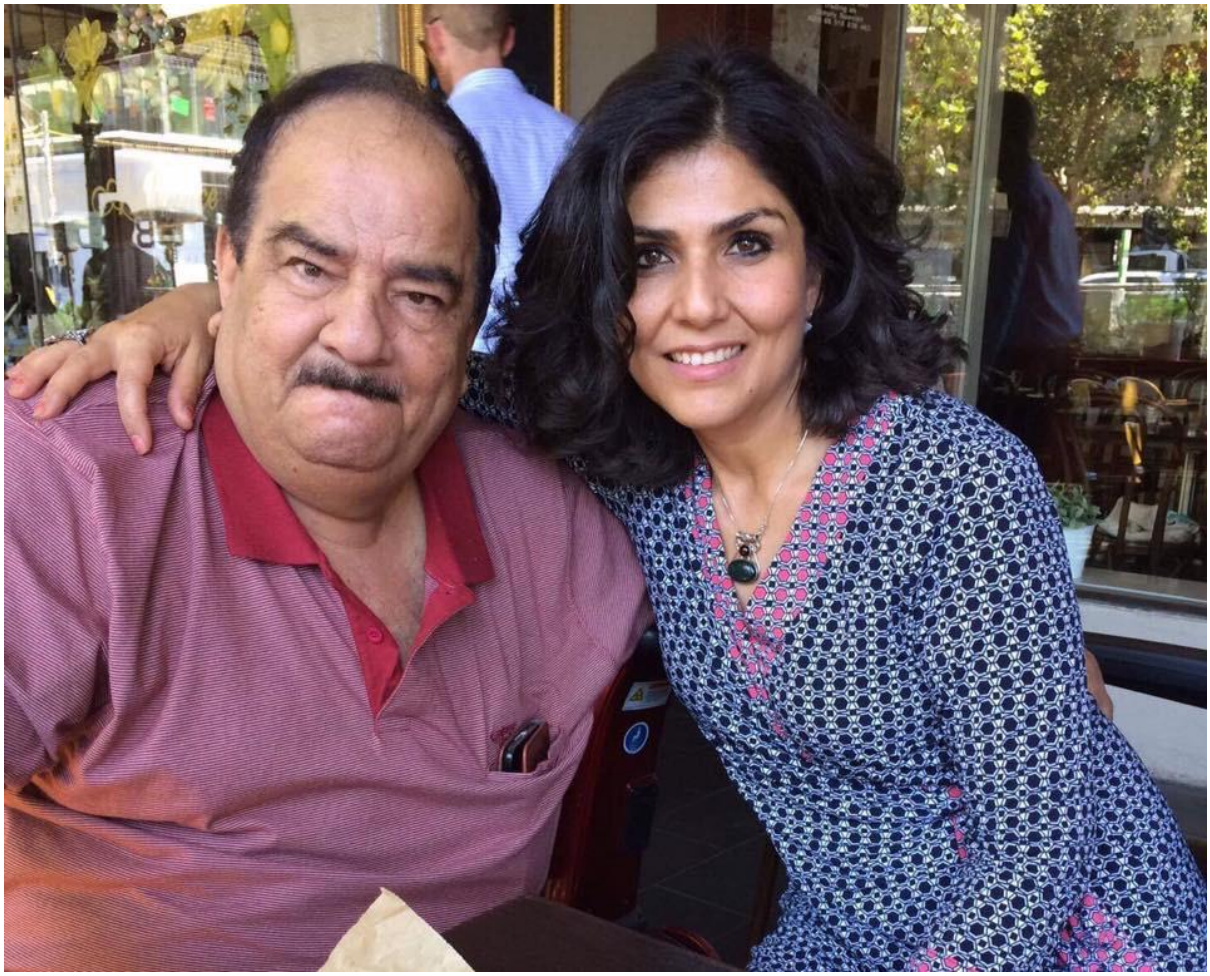
But identities cannot be confined to, or solely defined by memories of the past. As Hirsch argues, 'Postmemory is not an identity position but a generational structure of transmission embedded in multiple forms of mediation' (2012, p. 34). Thus, while Hirsch's postmemory theoretical formulation and Said's works on exile can help us understand some of the elements that might shape the Palestinian identity, it is important to broaden the discussion beyond that.

Hirsch (2008) highlights the importance for the postmemory generation to maintain a living connection to the traumatic events of the past, especially as a generation of Holocaust survivors pass away. 'At stake is precisely the 'guardianship' of a traumatic personal and generational past with which some of us have a 'living connection,' and that past's passing into history' (Hirsch, 2008, p. 104). By contrast, for the exiled Palestinians, their cause of their trauma has not yet ended. The impact of our *al-Nakba al-mustamirah*, ongoing *al-Nakba* and its consequences, continue to shape the daily Palestinian lived experience, both in and outside of the homeland. We, the Palestinians, are entrusted to guard the memories of past traumatic events, in order to understand and address current traumatic events. The 'living connections' in the homeland still exist as the conflict continues with no end in sight.

In 2014, my Canadian-born fourteen-year-old son was filled with horror as he watched on his laptop images of Israeli F16s dropping one-ton bombs on high rises in his grandparents' neighbourhood, reducing them to rubble. There were days when we thought they may have

been killed. Young Palestinian-Australians took to Facebook, posting messages wishing for the safety of their relatives, their grandparents uncles and aunties in Gaza. All the children who joined that campaign were second and third generation Palestinian-Australians. This trauma is alive, and it inhabits us across the generations.

PART TWO: COFFEE WITH GEORGE ·



For our children.

These stories belong to them.

This biographical novel spans over 100 years of my family history, starting in Palestine with the birth of my grandfather Sheik Hussein in 1918, and ending in 2018 in Australia, where I spent time with my father interviewing him for this project. Although I attempt to remain faithful in narrating my father's personal stories in the way that he experienced them – insofar as any writer is able to honour the experiences of another – I also rely on a host of fictional characters as a device to convey a broader collective Palestinian experience. The novel hopes to foster a deeper and more personal understanding of the impact of the trauma Palestinians suffer in the homeland, and through the process of being uprooted and exiled.

PROLOGUE

She offers me her words to reconstruct my life. She encourages me to open up. She picks at my wounds and confronts me with my contradictions. She bribes me with her attention and praise. She tests my patience. I will not stand before her, vulnerable and tired. I am not an old open book with falling out pages and faded ink that needs to be reprinted. I am not an abandoned old building that needs to be restored. I am still standing. I am the voice in her head. Her mentor. Her teacher. Her father. My answers shape her questions and my words roll off her tongue.

I

am

salt in this earth

life sprouting from its soil

I

am

the beginning

a first letter in a word

a placenta inside a pregnant sky

promising fortunes and blessings

I

am

the first raindrop in a dry spell

washing away the dust

nourishing plants and trees

growing life between stones

and green leaves through rocks

Abdul Karim Sabawi

(1)

BEFORE HE WAS BORN: PALESTINE 1918 – 1941

Before he was born, his mother Khadija climbed up a sycamore tree and howled and cried for weeks. His father the Sheik appealed for her to come down, but it was of no use. Relatives and neighbours came in waves to console her and try to lure her down, but their attempts were met with more howls and their clothes were drenched from her falling tears.

The wind echoed Khadija's sorrow across the fields, swooping over the hills and valleys of Palestine. A restless night breeze urgently whispered her name into her mother's ears 'Khadija...Khadija…' Her mother Aziza woke up from her sleep with her hand on her heart and her daughter's name on her lips. 'Khadija! *Allah yostor*. God shield us from evil'. Aziza quickly threw her veil over her head and with urgent steps ran outside 'I'm coming my daughter. I'm coming, *ya binty*!'

Aziza knew Khadija could not hear her, but still she repeated her daughter's name over and over as she rode her donkey along the Mediterranean coast all the way from the town of Salamah near Jaffa to the Tuffah district in Gaza 80 km to the south. When she arrived west of Mohatta Street in Tuffah, she was greeted with a welcoming committee of barefooted scantily dressed children. They formed a circle around her, forcing her to listen as they competed to tell her the story of how Khadija had climbed up the tree and refused to come down. Aziza listened for a few minutes, and then with a simple wave of her walking cane, the crowd of children parted like the red sea, and Aziza marched through into the Sheik's home.

In the front yard, under the sycamore tree, Aziza lifted the hem of her dress and stepped into her daughter's puddle of tears. She opened her arms wide and looked up to the branch where Khadija sat. 'Come down my daughter. My arms can carry your pain. My heart will share your sorrow. My eyes will cry your tears.'

Khadija looked down at her mother and for the first time in months, she spoke. 'I'm not your daughter. I am a cat. I have swallowed all my children'.

**

Khadija and the Sheik were an unusual couple.

The revered Sheik, who had taught generations of boys with his sharp intellect and excruciating stick, was once a frightened child facing an uncertain future. He was born in Palestine at the end of WWI in a mud brick room in the Tuffah district of Gaza. His mother Moftiya nursed him for two years to the rhythm of boots stomping the grounds of the holy land as British soldiers canvassed their Empire's latest conquest.

Moftiya deeply resented the British army for taking her husband Ahmad away from her. He was martyred in the Battle of Beersheba, fighting with the British against the Ottoman rulers – a pointless war as far as she was concerned. Moftiya never understood the necessity of war and she had very little interest in politics. She was a practical woman, more concerned with finding daily bread and, from to time, extracting doses of happiness away from the hardships of life.

After her husband was killed, Moftiya found work grinding grains in a wealthy Christian home in a Gaza neighbourhood far from her district and away from her neighbour's judgmental eyes. She had too much pride to be seen as a servant so, following the dawn prayers every morning, Moftiya would straighten up her only hand-stitched long dress, loosely wrap her white veil around her head, lift Hussein into her arms and discreetly head for work before the break of daylight. She loved those early morning walks through the green vegetable fields, the banana plantations and the orange groves.

At work, she watched over Hussein with loving eyes as she rotated the hand mill to grind the grain into soft flour. The circular motion of the basalt gave her time to reflect on her misfortunes and losses. It also gave her time to dream. She was raising a man and soon he would be walking and talking and, before too long, he would be taking care of her. But little did she know that Hussein's fate was otherwise sealed.

At almost three years of age, he was still not walking entirely without assistance. Moftiya began a manic search for cause and cure for his disability. Hussein's memory of his childhood comprised of years of waiting next to his mother in hospital corridors, sleeping on benches outside doctors' clinics, watching her praying for him in holy shrines and sitting

helplessly next to her as she read long verses from the Quran in the mosque. The older he grew, the more he became aware of the seriousness of his condition. He was horrified that the day would come when he would be too heavy for his mother to carry and too disabled to lean on his walking stick to walk. And despite their agonizing search, no amount of modern medicine, spiritual healing, Sufi whirling, chanting, humming or praying gave his legs the strength they needed to walk without assistance.

Reconciling himself with the idea that Moftiya's search for cure may never yield results, Hussein learned to walk using a cane and turned his attention to finding a way to compensate for his disability. He searched for knowledge. He busied himself during the endless waiting hours at clinics by trying to decode words, treating the alphabets like pieces of a puzzle that made sense only when threaded together. He paid attention to flyers, leaflets, posters, and road signs. He memorised words and deconstructed them only to reconstruct them again. Until, much to his mother's surprise and to the astonishment of everyone who knew them, Hussein became fully literate at the young age of six - a miracle given that they lived in a district where few could read.

The young boy freed himself from the confines of his disability by bravely venturing into the open world of knowledge. He sourced books and magazines from cousins and friends who travelled to nearby villages and towns. Crowds started to gather around him all the time. They asked him to read their mail, tell them what was in the newspapers and share with them stories of what was happening in the world and how this related to their lives in Tuffah.

When the British army shot and killed Palestinian protestors in Jerusalem in 1929, the 10-year-old Hussein impressed his usual guests by connecting these events with the British policy of riot control in India. A year later, he told a much larger crowd stories of Gandhi's civil disobedience and his march to the sea to protest the British government's monopoly on salt-making in India: 'Gandhi marched 400 km to the sea to make his own salt.'

The crowd was sceptical. Abu-Sa'adah who lived across the street from the Sheik waved his hand in a dismissive gesture, 'What can one man do?'

Abu-Awny whispered, 'And how much salt can one man make?' Abu-Awny's house was next door to the Sheik's and they shared the open garden between them. He was always

worried that if he spoke too loudly, his wife Fatima would hear his voice and summon him back to the house.

Abraham weighed in. 'Britain is a great power. These little protests can't defeat them. They will eat him and the protestors alive… without adding salt.' The men laughed. Abraham worked in Yaffa and lived in Salamah but he often visited his relatives in Gaza and made sure to stop at the Sheik's home every time he could.

Hussein was always patient and respectful with his guests, and he chose his words with great care. 'One man can inspire millions. Do you know how many Indians followed Gandhi's lead? Five million joined Gandhi's protest and defied the British government.'

Hussein decided not to tell them that Gandhi was taken to prison. He was eager to convince them of the strength of non-violent civil disobedience. Perhaps this was in part due to his disability and lack of physical strength. He wanted to believe that intellectual strategic resistance could be more effective than violence in the face of a brutal powerful enemy. No matter what his motives may have been, Hussein had a talent for placing local events within a global context.

It was Hussein's war on illiteracy that earned him the highly respected title of 'Sheik' at an unusually young age. Seated on a mattress on the floor in his home in Tuffah, too heavy for his mother to carry, his legs too weak to work in the fields, Hussein ran reading classes for boys and men of all ages. The classes were popular, and he had regular students. Eventually, he applied to the British authorities for a school license. They sent an inspector, Basheer ElRayes, a bright young man appointed by the British Mandate government to act as Education Liaison Officer. Basheer ElRayes was so impressed with the Sheik's library and his breadth of knowledge that he gave him a license on the spot.

The young Sheik Hussein opened the first official school to fight illiteracy in the Tuffah district. The school ran flexible hours to accommodate the needs of families who wanted their children to work with them in the fields during the sowing and reaping seasons. He named his school *'Madrasat Sorour Al-Atfal,'* meaning the School of Joy for children.

Empowered by the official recognition, the young Sheik, with the help of his neighbours, built a classroom made of fortified cement across the yard from his mud brick home. He made just enough money from teaching to enable his mother to finally stop working in the Christian home. Every night, some of the most prominent men from the district gathered around him to catch up on the news, and to discuss the events of the day. But even though the young Sheik was always surrounded by people who loved and admired him, he still felt that something was missing from his life. He was in his mid-teens and his desire to be with a woman grew stronger every day. One night, as the usual crowd gathered, the Sheik made an announcement; 'I would like to find wife.'

The men looked at each other in shock. It took a few moments before Abu-Sa'adah broke the silence, 'But Sheik, women need more than intellect. They need…'

'I know what they need. I am able to satisfy *that* need.'

'Do you have anyone in mind?' Abraham asked the Sheik.

'No.' The Sheik responded. 'I just want someone with a good heart and a strong able body!'

The Sheik was under no illusion. He knew it would be hard to find a woman who would accept marrying a man with disabilities. But he believed that his other half was out there. He just needed to start the search. He asked everyone who came to visit him that week to spread the word and to keep an eye out for a special woman, one with a good heart and strong physical health. These were his only conditions.

**

Khadija and her siblings grew up in the town of Salamah. They were raised by their mother Aziza and their stepfather Abraham. Khadija's mind was as plain as her features, her body tall, wide and strong. Suitors weren't flocking to ask for her hand. Her mother often wondered what a worse fate would be – that her daughter might never get married, or that she would marry someone who would find it hard to tolerate her lack of intelligence and less than average looks. When Abraham came back from Gaza and told his wife that a wise handicapped

sheik in Tuffah was seeking a bride, Aziza quickly dressed her daughter up and took her to him.

And so it was.

Khadija found happiness and love in the home of the Sheik. She loved that he could relieve her of the burden of thinking and making decisions and he loved that she could perform all the physical duties required to keep the house and the school running while also fulfilling his personal needs. Her physical attributes complemented his intelligence. They completed one another.

Khadija spent her days at home with her mother-in-law cooking, cleaning and sewing while the Sheik received his guests and students in the classroom across the yard. Occasionally Khadija would offer the Sheik's special guests something to eat or drink.

Sometimes during the day, if the Sheik needed to get out of the house to pay a visit to a friend or to explore the market place, he would call out Khadija's name and she would drop everything and come running. The Sheik would lean on his cane and walk to where their donkey was in the yard with Khadija not far behind him. She would lift his foot into the stirrups and help him lift his weight onto the back of the donkey.

At the end of the day, when all the visitors left the Sheik's classroom, he would shift his body from its sitting position on the mattress to a lying down position, gesturing to Khadija to join him on the mattress. Not much time passed before Khadija became pregnant.

With a baby in her belly, Khadija and the Sheik believed that they held the world in the palm of their hands. They did not conceive how cruel fate could be. The pregnancy ended with a silent birth. The midwife wrapped the lifeless infant in a cloth and took him away. His parents never got to hold him. A piece of their hearts was torn out of their chests and quickly buried in a cemetery far from their reach. Khadija's breast milk wasted away. Every drop, every leak that dampened her dress, reminded her of the child she would never hold.

But hope always manages to rise from the pit of despair. One morning, Khadija woke up and the world was smiling again with a promise of new life growing inside of her. This time, she gave birth to a boy they named Ahmed.

They celebrated every breath he took for the miracle that it was. Khadija learned how to bathe him, nurse him, change his soiled cloths and at night she watched over him and breathed in his scent until they both drifted to sleep. She was now finally part of the mother's circle in her neighbourhood. She had her own stories to tell of sleepless nights, teething aches, sore nipples and first smiles. But tragedy hit again when Ahmed was six months old and a mysterious disease stole his life. Once again Khadija and the Sheik were left with gutted hearts and an empty baby basket.

This time it took longer for Khadija to recover. She moved around the house in silence. She cleaned and cooked without any emotions, avoiding eye contact with the Sheik. She was worried that the only thing they'd see in one another's eyes would be their shared grief, a deep ocean that threatened to swallow them into the darkness of inconsolable sorrow.

The Sheik kept himself busy with his students and his new business idea. He had saved enough money to buy three calves that he could grow into bulls before selling them for a good price. With the help of his neighbours, he built an additional room that he used as a barn for the animals.

Eventually, little by little, life forced itself back in. It began with the small glances, the knowing smiles, the little jokes, the hand holding, the whispers, the touches, the embraces and … Khadija got pregnant a third time. This time, she gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. They named her Amal, meaning hope.

Amal was a fast learner. She walked and talked before she was two. She kept Khadija and the Sheik busy with her chatter and songs. One day, as the family was enjoying their evening by an open fire, Khadija placed a big pot of water on it to wash some clothes. She left the room and the Sheik and Amal were singing together. Suddenly Amal stood up and started to dance and walk backwards. The Sheik, horrified, shouted at her to stop. He tried to stand up to run after her but his legs were too weak and he fell face down on the ground. Amal fell into

the boiling pot. The handicapped Sheik smashed his face into the floor and wept. Khadija ran into the room, too late to save Amal. She fainted.

When she woke up, she found herself in hospital where she was kept for months in a special ward for mentally ill patients. She did her time there in silence. When they finally released her, and she stepped back into her home, she fell to her knees and began to crawl and howl like a cat in pain, before she finally climbed up on the sycamore tree refusing to come down.

Her mother called out to her '*ya binty*, God is generous. *Allah Karim*. He rewards those who are patient.' Khadija did not come down.

Months passed and no one knew how she survived or whether she occasionally descended into the garden in the stillness of the night to find sustenance in leftover foods and breadcrumbs.

The Sheik couldn't forgive himself for his helplessness. He couldn't save his daughter. He had nothing to offer his wife. He plunged into silence.

Moftiya picked up Khadija's tasks around the heartbroken home. She made sure that the wheels of daily life continued to spin. Food was prepared, floors cleaned, coals burnt, clothes washed and once in a blue moon, when guests came, they were let in and offered a beverage.

Words wilted away and silence grew like nettle plants, stinging the hearts of everyone touched by it, until one night, Khadija's voice cut through the thick walls of quietude, echoing despair to the seventh sky: 'Dear God, why didn't you create me in the shape of a worm? Why am I not a wooden branch from a cactus tree? Why didn't you make me a stone that has no feelings, cannot hear or speak? Why didn't you make me infertile, never to carry a child in my womb or give birth or nurse? What have I done that you have to immerse me in this intolerable suffering? Where is your mercy God? Where is your mercy?'

Khadija saw a giant creature dressed in white appear before her. He was so tall his head was as high as the clouds, and so wide his chest covered the length of the cactus hedges. She

screamed, ‘You are the angel of death. You took all my babies from me. I have no more to give you’.

‘I am not the angel of death. I am the angel of good fortune. You will give birth to many boys. You will not suffer the loss of any of them neither will you suffer the loss of any of your grandchildren. Your sons and their children will travel far and wide on this earth.’

The giant came closer to her, his light cloaked her, and she felt calm for the first time in months.

‘Peace be upon you from the God of Mercy! Peace be upon you from the God of Mercy!’ he said.

With these words, the giant began to disappear into the fog. Khadija felt God’s mercy wash over her. She came down from the tree, washed and changed her clothes, rubbed jasmine flowers on her skin and put on eyeliner before going to sleep under the covers next to her husband.

**

Khadija tossed and turned on the mattress. It had been weeks since she came down from the tree, yet still the Sheik made no attempt to touch her. She feared he might have chosen to abandon her forever. Loud bellowing from the barn interrupted her thoughts. She waited for the noise to die down but it only escalated, waking the Sheik up from his deep slumber. ‘God give us strength,’ he said as he sat up and gestured for Khadija to bring him his cane. ‘Our calves have grown into bulls. Now they want to fight till the death. We must sell them first thing in the morning’.

Khadija assisted the Sheik up on his feet. Her trembling hands gave away her fears. She was petrified of what the bulls might do to her husband. He gently wrapped his arms around her for the first time in what seemed like an eternity. ‘Don’t worry about me’ he said, adding with a smile, ‘It’s the bulls you should be worried about.’

Outside the barn, the Sheik gave Khadija his instructions: 'I'm going inside. You must stay out here and make sure you lock the door behind me. Don't unlock it or try to come in until I call you.'

'No…' Khadija protested. The Sheik looked at her as if seeing her for the first time. Never before throughout the years of their marriage had she protested any decision he made. Her concern for his safety and her doubt in his ability to deal with the animals only filled his heart with more determination and courage. 'You heard me' he said with an authoritative voice. 'Stand outside and keep this door locked until I call you'.

The Sheik slowly pushed the barn door open and quietly stepped inside. Khadija shut the door, pulled the latch across the iron bar and waited. Seconds later, she heard the Sheik roar so loud he instilled fear into the hearts of the restless beasts. A silence followed. The Sheik finally called on Khadija to come in.

Inside, Khadija's eyes surveyed the scene with amazement and adoration while the Sheik's eyes surveyed Khadija with infinite pleasure. The bulls were cowered in separate corners, heads bowed down like frightened puppies. It was a glorious triumph that filled the Sheik with pride and brought back his confidence. He asked Khadija to tie the bulls up with steel chains, and when she hesitated, he coaxed her, 'Come on, don't be afraid'.

'Afraid?' Khadija responded playfully, 'Why would I be afraid? I have a lion to protect me'. The Sheik could hardly contain his desire.

That night, Khadija and the Sheik rushed back to their mattress, exhilarated by the victory and seduced by the sweet tingly feeling in their guts. That night, the Sheik's manhood was fully restored, and Khadija's womanhood was thoroughly savoured. That night, hope forced itself back into their lives and love soared high above their home. That night Karim began to grow inside Khadija's womb.

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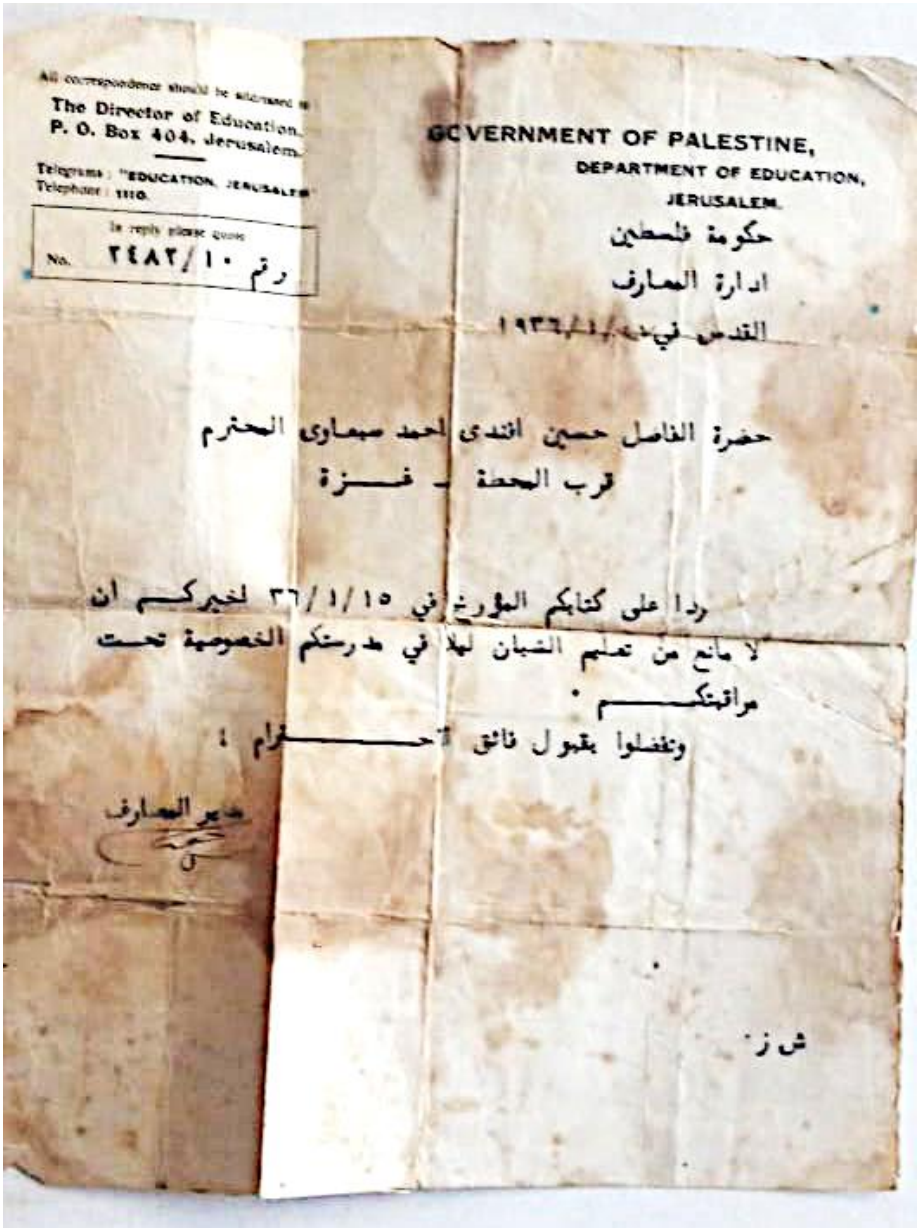

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GOVERNMENT OF PALESTINE,
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION,
JERUSALEM.

حكومة فلسطين
ادارة المعارف
القدس في ١٩٣٦/١/

حضرة الفاضل حسين افندى احمد سباوى المحترم
قرب المحطة ـ غـــزة

ردا على كتابكم المؤرخ في ١٥/١/٣٦ لخبركـــم ان
لا مانع من تعليم الشبان لهلا في مدرستكم الخصوصية تحت
مراقبتكـــــم .
وتفضلوا بقبول فائق الاحـــــترام ؛

مدير المعارف

ش ز.

Dated January 1936, addressed from the Government of Palestine to the respected Hussien (*Affendi*) Ahmad Sabawi, Railway Station, Gaza, stating 'in response to your letter dated January 15, 1936, we have no objection to you running classes for you students in the evening.'

Sheik Hussein in his home in the Tuffah District, Palestine c. 1950

Khadija c. 1950

(2)

THE GENEROUS GOD: PALESTINE 1942

Gaza's railway station was bustling. The train from Yaffa unloaded a fusion of merchants, local travelers and British and Australian soldiers. Vendors shouting out the prices of cardamom coffee, Za'ater pies and pottery souvenirs competed for attention. Aziza stood on the platform next to her suitcase, relieved to have her feet finally planted on still grounds after the long journey. She gestured to a scrawny young porter to pick up her suitcase, but the boy ignored her and chased after an Australian soldier yelling 'hello… g'day mate… give me… I carry'.

Aziza shook her head and clicked her tongue at the young boy's lack of manners. Times had changed. In the old days, the boy would have been ashamed to let an older woman carry such a load by herself; he might have even offered to help her free of charge. But since the beginning of the Second World War and the upsurge in the arrival of soldiers from the allied forces, wartime economy provided a boost for local businesses including street vendors and porters.

Aziza sighed as she balanced her suitcase on top of her head and began her long walk from the railway station to her daughter's home in Tuffah. She missed the days when she was able to ride her donkey along the coastal roads from Salamah, but that simple trip was no longer possible. Armed Jewish groups set up training camps along the way, and British forces set up checkpoints to subdue Palestinian resistance against the British forces and the armed Jewish groups. Travelling by train was the safest option for Aziza. What else was she to do? Her daughter was ready to have her baby and custom required the mother to be by her side.

**

Moftiya greeted Aziza with a jug of water and a cold smile. She didn't like how other women made themselves at home in her house. Since the Sheik married Khadija, not only did she lose her special bond with her son, having to share him with another

woman, she also lost territory and space. Khadija's mother became a regular staying guest in their home, and if this wasn't enough, other women from the neighbourhood started to come and go freely to check up on Khadija throughout her pregnancy.

When Moftiya saw Khadija offering her mother pomegranates fresh from their tree, she decided it was time to draw the line. She appealed to her son to intervene.

' You must talk to your wife. This is not acceptable. We have to have order and rules. We can't squander our food like this. Does her mother really need to be here all this time? We could have sent for her when Khadija was in labour.'

The Sheik listened to his mother respectfully and promised that he would talk to Khadija. But on that cold December night, after the last guest left the Sheik's room, and as Khadija leaned forward to blow out the Kerosene lamp, the Sheik could not remember a word his mother said. His entire focus shifted to other more urgent and far more pleasant matters.

Moftiya who shared the adjoining room with Aziza waited that night to hear the rhythm of her son's voice through the thin mud walls reprimanding his wife. Instead, she heard a different type of rhythm, marked by hard breathing and occasional outbursts of laughter.

Aziza giggled on her mattress. 'God reward the Sheik, this will surely induce labour. Khadija will have a baby suckling on her breast by tomorrow night'.

Moftiya smiled. She was accustomed to these nightly sounds, and much to her surprise, they always filled her heart with delight. She couldn't be any happier for her son.

**

The morning after, Khadija's contractions began, and Aziza assumed her God given duty as her mother to assist her. 'We need more coals to keep her and her baby warm'

she told Moftiya.

Moftiya was horrified. Coals cost money and there was no need to have more coals than what was already available. 'There is a mountain of coals right here' she pointed to the corner of the room.

Aziza looked at the small pile and let out a sarcastic laugh. 'A mountain? That's barely enough for one night. As the saying goes, if you can't afford the horse, don't bother buying a saddle'.

'This is what we have' Moftiya shot back with the proverbial insult; 'if you don't like it, you can drink the sea.'

Aziza was outraged, 'I am a guest in the Sheik's home. I have no interest in drinking the sea.' She stormed out and headed across the yard to complain to the Sheik about his mother's ungracious behavior. But the Sheik was engaged in a deep conversation with some of the men from the neighbourhood about things that were far removed from the lives of the women in the family.

The Sheik spoke in a measured tone 'The British forces only practice their strength against us. They arrest our activists and turn a blind eye to Jewish terrorism. They are practically handing over our land to them.'

Aziza was well aware of the growing numbers of Jews near her hometown Salamah and had seen with her own eyes how the British Authorities forcefully evicted the Palestinian peasants from their farms only to hand the land over to the new Jewish immigrants. She worried her family would suffer the same fate.

'Soon, it will be over for Great Britain,' Abu-Sa'adah said. 'Germany will win the war and we will win our freedom from the *Egnleez*.'

'And what makes you think Hitler will be any better?' The Sheik's voice gave away his frustration. 'We cannot rely on one occupation to free us from another, or one tyrant to free us

from another. We fought with the British against the Ottomans and they betrayed us and promised to give our land to the Jews. Freedom will not come to us through an external power. We have to be worthy of it.'

Aziza smiled at her daughter's good fortune. The Sheik was such a charismatic and articulate man amongst men, and from what she heard the night before, he was also pleasing to his woman.

Aziza decided to wait until the men left to bring up her complaint to the Sheik. When she did, the Sheik sided with her and told his mother there had to be enough heat to ensure Khadija's and the expected baby's comfort and survival.

The Sheik ordered more bags of coals, enough to heat the room throughout the rest of the winter months.

At night, the coals arrived and so did Karim.

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He didn't wait for the midwife. He raced through the birth canal and landed straight into the hands of his grandmother. Surprised to receive him so quickly, Aziza cut the umbilical cord cheerfully. '*Mashallah*, he's a healthy baby boy who obviously has no patience whatsoever!' She wrapped him up in a blanket and handed him over to his mother while Moftiya ran out the door to tell the Sheik the good news.

'*Allah Karim*. God is generous. He has given you a healthy baby boy'.

The Sheik walked in leaning on his cane and watched his newborn son's tiny hand wrapped around Khadija's finger, his mouth latched on to her breast. Everyone in the room cried tears of joy.

'He is a good boy.' The sheik smiled. He knows how long we have waited for him'.

It didn't take long for news of the birth to spread. The first to congratulate the proud parents were Abu-Awny and his wife Fatima.

Fatima had grown close to Khadija over the years. They borrowed from each other everything from brooms and pots to clothes and scarves. This time, Fatima brought with her a wicker basket. Her youngest child was now too big to sleep in it.

'You can keep this for now so your baby has a good place to sleep. But you'll have to give it back in seven months.'

Khadija grinned and squeezed Fatima's hand. 'You are pregnant again? Congratulations! That's wonderful news!'

Fatima smiled at her friend and declared with the confidence of a clairvoyant; 'I'm carrying your son's bride. Just you wait and see.' The two women laughed.

'Indeed. God is generous. *Allah Karim,*' said the Sheik.

The life of the baby was seen as a gift from a generous God to a couple who for years experienced the bitterness of loss and grief. The Sheik named him Abdul Karim, worshiper of the Generous God.

God must have been pleased for his generosity poured like rain after years of draught. Throughout the decade that followed, Khadija gave birth to six healthy boys. Eager to stay on the good side of the divine, the Sheik gave them all names beginning with Abdul – worshipper - and adding to each, one of God's ninety-nine holy names: Rahim, the Compassionate; Latif, the Kind; Muti, the Giving; Razak, the Provider; and Nasser, the Victorious.

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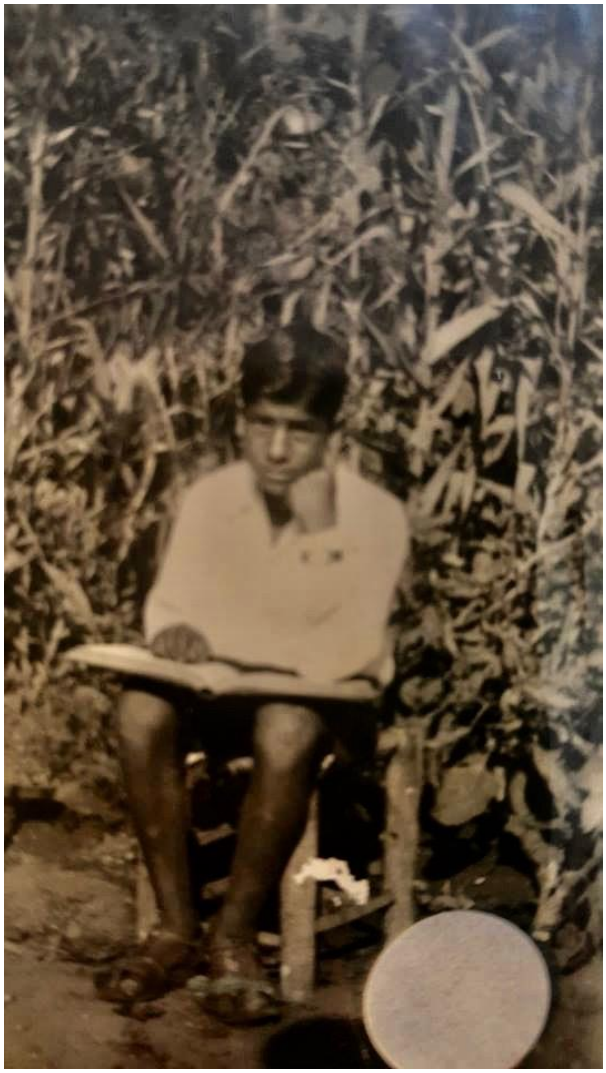

Abdul Karim doing his homework in the garden in Tuffah c.1952

I pray your hand
will fall through the clouds
wipe my terrified eyes
heal a wound that flares
in the deep of the night

Abdul Karim Sabawi

(3)

MADNESS: PALESTINE 1947-48

Darkness draped over the Tuffah district. Jasmine vines perfumed the walkways between the mud brick houses and along the dusty roads. Karim rolled out his mattress to the flickering light of the kerosene lamp. The five-year-old was proud he was old enough to prepare his own bedding by himself.

They slept in the same order every night. The Sheik's mattress next to the wall, beside him Khadija's, and next to her Rahim who had just turned three, followed by Karim. Muti was just a baby at the time so when he wasn't suckling on Khadija's breast, the Sheik cradled him in his arm. Sometimes in the morning, Karim and Rahim woke up to find Muti sleeping on the Sheik's face, a sight that always made them giggle.

Rahim and Karim slipped under the covers, their eyes wide open and their ears intently tuned in, in anticipation of their nightly bedtime story, ready to capture and imagine every word the Sheik was about to utter.

'In the name of God, the merciful the compassionate,' the Sheik began, 'Once upon a time, *Kan ya Makan fee qadeem alzaman*, a hunter caught a small bird in the forest. The bird said to the hunter, "you are a big man, I am too small to satisfy your hunger. Set me free and I will give you three wisdoms guaranteed to bring you great fortune in life. But before I begin, I need to know I am safe. So I will tell you the first wisdom while I am in your grip, the second while I stand on this low branch within your reach and the third and final wisdom, I will tell you when I am on top of that tree." The hunter agreed and so the bird began, "Never believe what cannot be". The hunter released his grip and the bird flew to the low branch and added, "Never regret the past". The bird flew on to the highest branch on the tree and told the hunter, "I swallowed a gem that weighs 200 grams. If you had cut me open it would have made you a very rich man". The bird watched as the hunter started to curse himself for his stupidity and for letting the bird out of his grip. When he finally calmed down the hunter demanded that the bird tell him the third wisdom, but the bird shook his beak and said to the hunter, "You didn't listen to the first two wisdoms I gave you, so why would I bother giving you the third" and with that the bird flew away into the horizon.'

Khadija whispered: ‘They are asleep.’

The Sheik waited a few minutes before he reached his arm across and gently placed his hand first under Karim’s nose, then under Rahim’s. Scarred by the cruelty of death, the Sheik could not trust that the wicked angel would not return to steal another one of his precious children. He became obsessed with the boys’ breathing, sometimes waking several times during the night to seek comfort in the warmth of the air they exhaled.

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Karim coughed once, then twice, then three times, and the Sheik’s heart began to sink. He nudged Khadija, ‘Wake up! Karim is coughing’.

Khadija got up and gave Karim water and went back to bed. An hour later, the Sheik nudged her again, ‘He’s still coughing. Maybe the air is too dry. Why don’t you boil some water?’

Khadija rubbed her eyes and stood up, half asleep. She felt her way in the darkness until she found the gas canister. She lit a fire and boiled a big pot of water, but in the morning Karim’s cough was worse.

The Sheik held Karim in his arm, placed his hand on his forehead and recited from the Quran ‘And we sent down in the Quran such things that have healing and mercy for the believer.’ He read many more verses from the holy book, but still the cough persisted.

By noon, Khadija asked Moftiya for help. The matriarch was impatiently waiting for this request. After all, if she didn’t show her skills at times like these, then what good was she to anyone? She marched with purpose toward the sick child, took one look at him and immediately began to work on the remedy.

Khadija watched as Moftiya chopped fresh mint leaves and mixed them with tahini and vegetable oil before messaging the paste on the boy’s chest and wrapping him up in soft cotton

fabric, all the while explaining each step in a dispassionate voice that carried the confidence of generations of knowledge. At the end she told Khadija, 'The boy's skin needs to breathe out the toxins, so you must only use Egyptian sheer cotton until he's better.'

It was a very impressive performance, but much to Moftiya's disappointment, even the wisdom of a thousand and one ancestors was not enough to heal the boy.

At night, their neighbour Fatima came and presented Khadija with a pouch of herbs collected from her garden. 'Fresh thyme, sage and mint leaves,' she told Khadija. 'Put them in boiling water and let Karim breath the steam. He will leap like a horse in the morning.'

Fatima looked at the Sheik clutching the boy in his arm and she was moved to tears. She wanted to lighten up the mood a little: 'If this doesn't work, just tell Karim if he's not better soon I will have to find another groom for my daughter to marry.'

Karim opened his eyes quickly and tried to sit up. This made everyone laugh.

'She's not here,' Fatima said to Karim. 'Suhailah, my beautiful princess, does not chase after boys. You will have to chase after her.'

Khadija laughed, 'He takes everything seriously. You know he is convinced Suhailah is his bride.'

'Let him get better and do well in life and he can choose any bride he wants,' the Sheik said. Fatima glared at the Sheik who quickly had to adjust what he said, 'Oh and of course, what better bride could there be than your daughter Suhailah'.

Later that night, Khadija boiled the herbs Fatima brought and placed a towel over Karim's head to trap the steam. The boy breathed the vapor for ten minutes before he fell asleep.

The Sheik, however, did not sleep. He watched over his son coughing through the night, and by the next morning, he called for a doctor. A young Jerusalemite doctor prescribed Kareem some medicine and updated the Sheik on the situation in the world beyond

Tuffah. ‘Jewish gangs are being armed by the British forces. They are training to take over all of Palestine.’ The Sheik listened with a heavy heart and assured the young doctor that the resistance would win in the end.

A week passed, and Karim’s health continued to deteriorate. The Sheik looked at Khadija, with tears in his eyes. ‘Take the boy to your mother’s house in Salamah. Let him die away from here. I cannot bear to witness another loss.’

Khadija was also worried about her son’s health, but she wasn’t afraid he would die. Since that night in the sycamore tree, the words of the angel of fortune rang in her ears like the bells of Gaza’s Saint Porphyrius on the eve of Easter: ‘There will be no more loss, death or grief in your life.’ Still, she was happy to carry out the Sheik’s orders and excited at the prospect of visiting her family in Salamah.

She packed a bag, planted baby Muti on her hip and asked Moftiya to care for Rahim while she was gone.

As was the custom, Karim kissed his father’s hand goodbye and he turned around to kiss his grandmother Moftiya’s hand, but Moftiya came down on her knees and threw her arms around him. Karim was surprised to see his grandmother’s face soften, a rare occurrence that was becoming rarer with the passing of time.

‘Be a good boy Karim,’ Moftiya’s tears came down. ‘Come back to us. I will let you have my chicken’s eggs when you return.’

A new bus line was running directly from Gaza to Salamah. Its interior was shining, and the upholstery of the seats smelled like soap. Karim’s curiosity and sense of adventure overpowered his illness. He sat up on the chair exhilarated by the newness of the experience and looked around him at the passengers. An assortment of headgears was on display; Kippahs, English hats, fezzes, veils and keffiyehs: regardless of head cover, all men and women dressed in western-style clothes. Only the older generation of Palestinian men and women and some younger Palestinian peasants wore traditional garb.

Karim stuck his face to the window and watched as the bus drove out of the ancient city of Gaza and through the new paved wide streets of Gaza City. He was dazzled by the automobiles parked outside the double story houses, the restaurants and cafes along the beach and the shopping strip along Omar Al-Mokhtar street. This was the first time Karim had left the Tuffah district. He never conceived that only a couple of kilometers away from the dusty roads, fields and valleys he knew, another world existed with wealth, running water and electricity and hardly any donkeys in sight. Karim looked at his mother in her long black dress, white veil and old flat pair of shoes and for the first time he realized that his family was poor. Tired by the weight of this discovery, the young boy closed his eyes and fell asleep.

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Aziza woke up alone. She rolled up her mattress and stepped outside. She looked up at the morning sky, 'God of mercy, bring the men home victorious and free.' She went into the chicken coop and picked the youngest and fattest chicken: 'My heart tells me someone dear will be here to eat you.'

Aziza slaughtered the bird, plucked its feathers, stuffed it with rice and nuts then placed it into the boiling pot of water and watched it simmer. She had no idea who she was cooking for, all she knew was that she had to be prepared to feed a loved one.

'Yumma!' Khadija called her mother. Aziza turned around and there was her daughter, back in her family home for the first time since she married the Sheik. At first, Aziza was delighted to see her daughter, but fear and doubt quickly took hold of her heart. 'The Sheik didn't send you home, did he?'

Khadija smiled and assured her mother, 'The Sheik loves me, and he sends you his regards. We came here for Karim. He's sick.'

Aziza sat them down and fed them. 'Nothing like chicken soup to heal,' she said as she spoon-fed Karim from a bowl of soup. She was proud that her intuition was almost never wrong.

After the meal, Karim fell asleep. When he woke up, he was lying down on a mattress and Aziza towered above him, puffing on a cigarette. He couldn't believe his eyes. He'd never seen a woman smoke. Only the men smoked in Tuffah.

'*Yallah* Khadija, let's get him ready. We'll find him a mystic healer at the tomb of Salamah Abu Hashim.'

'Shouldn't we wait for the men to come home? Maybe one of them can carry Karim to the tomb? He is too tired to walk and too big for me to carry.'

Aziza put her cigarette out. 'The men can't come home. If they did, the British dogs will arrest them. They, like most men in this town, have joined the resistance.'

Khadija stared at her mother while her mind tried to process the information. Should she ask for an explanation or just let her mother's words fall, like all things that her mind found hard to comprehend, like the Sheik's midnight guests who hid their faces behind keffiyeh, like the hidden guns beneath the rocks in the backyard, like the constant harassment of the British forces, like the random checks in Tuffah for weapons, like having to carry an ID, like knowing but not knowing that the world is changing. Should she ask why this peaceful town where she had grown up was now empty of its men?

'*Ya binty*, there are things you need to know and be prepared for. We are at war, fighting for our existence on this land. Your brothers and …'

'*Yumma*, let's go now to the tomb.' Khadija made her choice to worry about her son and let the fighters worry about everything else.

At the tomb, the mystic holy man was dressed in a red robe and a turban. He sat cross-legged on a prayer mat. Khadija and Aziza squatted on the floor across from him holding Karim and baby Muti. The mystic listened to Khadija and then put his hand on Karim and closed his eyes. 'You have no need to worry,' he said. 'This boy's star is high in the sky. He will live a long life. He will give of himself. But for now, to get him over the

illness, you need to burn a nail until the iron is red, drop it in a glass of donkey milk and have him drink this. Do it for a few days until he feels better.'

Aziza paid the holy man and they walked out with a new remedy. Fortunately, Aziza's neighbour's donkey had given birth only days earlier and they were happy to volunteer the donkey's milk to the boy.

It's not clear if Karim got better because of the mystic remedy, or because he could no longer stomach drinking the donkey's milk. But the important thing was that he recovered fast and soon they were ready to return to Gaza.

'Come with us. Don't stay here alone,' Khadija urged her mother as she kissed her goodbye. Aziza shook her head refusing the offer. Her intuition was telling her to run from Salamah as fast as she could, but how could she leave without knowing the fate of her men?

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The spring of 1948 arrived with a vengeance. Green velvet covered the hills and valleys of Palestine. The fruit trees blossomed, and the wild flowers spread out across the fields and into the private gardens, climbing over fences, ferociously forcing their existence while dispatching bouquets of fragrances into the air.

Karim held on to the hem of Khadija's long black dress and doubled his steps to keep up with her pace as she pulled the donkey away from Mohatta Street and into the nearby banana plantations to fetch water. Since his return from Salamah in good health, he resumed these magical daily outings alone with his mother, away from the cries and tantrums of his younger brothers. Khadija referred to him as her 'man' and 'protector', and he never failed to roll up his sleeves and flex his tender muscles to prove his strength to anyone who doubted his abilities.

The aroma of stews cooking in people's homes and fresh baked bread in communal ovens along Mohatta street gradually dissipated, giving rise to the savory

scent of *meramiah* and thyme herbs and the sweet smell of fruit blossoms and wild flowers in the fields.

Khadija made use of the time it took to walk to the wells to remind Karim of some important rules; 'Don't run through the vegetable beds or pick fruits from the trees in these fields. These are privately owned properties. We are only entitled to the water in the wells.' 'Always reply when someone greets you.' 'Don't forget to say *alhamdolelah*, praise be to God, if anyone asks how you're doing.'

Karim tried to remember and obey all these rules but sometimes, in the excitement of chasing a flock of birds or a beautiful coloured butterfly, some rules might have been broken.

When they arrived at the farming fields, Khadija looked at her little boy and began the usual challenge, '*Yallha,* Karim! Try to guess which well has its motor running?' Karim loved playing this game! He listened until his ears picked up the humming sound of an engine before triumphantly pointing Khadija in its direction.

Those outings could have been amongst Karim's most treasured childhood memories if it weren't for this one incident that brought them to an abrupt ending. That spring day, when they arrived at the well, they saw a man sitting under a tree holding a clay water jug. Khadija froze and squeezed her little boy's hand. '*Allah yoster.* God protect us. It's the *Majnoon* of Tuffah.'

Majnoon, Arabic for madman, was how people referred to the son of the Imam of Tuffah's local mosque. He was born with a delusional mind. His father tried to cure him with prayers and Quran readings, but the older the boy grew, the more unstable he became. Desperate, the Imam sought out magical cures and potions, but these methods, including beating the demons out of his son, only pushed the boy further into insanity. In the end, the Imam took his son to the Sheik's school in hope that education might stimulate his mind and counter his madness, but there was little that the Sheik could do.

The boy grew into a man who aimlessly wandered the streets of Tuffah. At times, he spoke like a scholar reciting poetry and Quran he learned at the Sheik's school. Other times, he uttered nonsensical words twirled in circles and chanted in strange languages. His moods were unpredictable, ranging between calm and violence. Sometimes during his fits of rage, the men in Tuffah would gather around him and tie him up to a tree to prevent him from hurting himself or others.

When the *Majnoon* saw Khadija and Karim, he quickly put his clay jug aside and stood up to welcome them. 'The wife and son of our learned and noble teacher the Sheik!'

Before Khadija could respond, the *Majnoon* grabbed their empty jugs from the donkey saddlebags, climbed up the well, carefully filled the jugs with water, then came down and placed the full jugs back into the donkey saddlebag. He patted Karim on the head, then grabbed his own water jug and climbed back on the well chanting Quranic verses with a beautiful voice, 'And when he [Moses] arrived at the watering (place) in Madyan, he found there a group of men watering (their flocks), and besides them he found two women who were keeping back (their flocks). He said: "What is the matter with you?" They said: "We cannot water (our flocks) until the shepherds take back (their flocks): And our father is a very old man.'

Khadija whispered to Karim, 'He thinks he's Moses. Let's get away from here fast' She swiftly sealed the top of the jugs with banana leaves to avoid spillage and let go of the donkey rope. The donkey always knew his way home. The *Majnoon* saw them leaving, he lifted his clay jug, smashed it on the side of the well and began to recite from a different kind of Quran. '*Barakeesh Barakeen*, the pigeon told me I was Haron's sister. Blond blonding brown browning black blacking terror terrifying.' He fell on the ground with spit foaming out of his mouth.

Karim ran for his life, abandoning his responsibility as his mother's protector. When he arrived at the house, he was too ashamed to look at his father. He sulked in his disgrace. Khadija arrived only minutes after he did.

That night the *Majoon* walked into the home of the Jabry family in Tuffah and severed the head of their newborn baby. Terrified, the people of Tuffah locked up their doors for the first time in decades. The bravest of their men went looking for him, but he was nowhere to be found.

That was the last day Karim and his mother went out on that magical journey to fetch water. The *Majnoon*'s senseless and ruthless violence gave Karim a taste of what was to come. Palestine was on the edge of *jnoon*, a madness that would last the rest of his life. A madness that would claim many of the lives he treasured and would send him disgraced into exile. The world changed that night. Karim just didn't know it yet.

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Rise

From the oceans of blood

From the ribs that are scattered in the open fields

From chests of the old men and the bellies of the women

From the hands of children that were severed as they prayed to the sky

Rise

A mountain of resilience and pride

And do not cry

Tears are forbidden ... save for a few

Let your heart’s sorrow be dignified

Let your heart’s patience be glorious

Kiss those who were massacred one by one

And gather what remains of corpses bloated by the sun

Abdul Karim Sabawi

(4)

AL- NAKBA: PALESTINE 1948

Breath. *Nafas*. This is the most important ingredient in Palestinian cooking. Anyone can follow a recipe but only a woman with *nafas* for food can prepare exceptional meals. Aziza had *nafas*.

She placed a pot on the *Kaz Babur* stove and poured milk into it. She hadn't made *Riz we Haleeb* since her first husband Ismael died more than twenty years ago in a work accident at the shipping docks in Yaffa, leaving her with two sons and one daughter to raise. This was his favourite desert, so when she mourned his death, she made a pact with God that she would never make *Riz we Haleeb* for another man. Today she was determined to break that pact and she was certain God would want her to.

When the milk reached a warm temperature, Aziza added rice and began to stir as she looked around her and contemplated every detail of her modest home. Ismael built this house for her with his bare hands when she was his bride. Her eyes followed the sunbeams that came through the window to rest on the mattress beneath and she remembered waking up to the gentle embrace of the sun on their first morning together. 'This is our house,' she sighed.

The milk and rice began to thicken. After Ismael's death, Aziza's family and friends surrounded her, offering food, love and support, but as the days passed, her brothers' wives grew weary of the burden of having more mouths to feed, her neighbours and friends became fearful that the young widow would steal their husbands and her parents became worried about their daughter's reputation.

Aziza added sugar, rose water and orange blossom water into the pot and continued to stir for a few more minutes. It was her brilliance in the kitchen that enabled her to raise her children. Not long after Ismael's death, Aziza put her God-given *nafas* into a catering business. She stuffed clay pots with rice, spices and lamb and prepared the most exquisite *Qidra* for the elites of Salamah. But despite her financial independence, her family pressured her to get married a second time. 'Marriage is *sater*, a shield that protects a woman's reputation,' her

mother insisted. And when Abraham asked for her hand in marriage and she refused, her mother reminded her of the old adage, 'The shade of a man is better than the shade of a wall.'

Aziza inhaled the sweet fragrance rising from the pot. The mix was thick and ready to be served. She turned off the heat and reached out for the small bowls in the kitchen cabinet. Her second husband Abraham bought her these bowls. He was a rough man with hard edges, but he loved her in his own way. He was good to her boys, helping them grow into fine men and he never interfered with her choices. When she went to Tuffah to visit her daughter Khadija he always gave his permission without asking too many questions.

Aziza held the bowls close to her heart and wept. She never showed Abraham that she loved him. When he joined the resistance, she was so proud of him but said nothing. When he left the house the last time, with her two sons, to fight against the foreign Jewish gangs that were spreading terror in Palestine, she embraced them all and prayed for them. But she felt too proud to beg them, and especially Abraham to stay. The men resisted the loss of their land, even though they faced extremely poor odds, fighting with a small number of outdated rifles against an organized well-armed enemy backed by Britain and European powers. All she could do was pray for their victory. But God was not listening to her prayers. She remembered her mother's words, 'The shade of a man is better than the shade of a wall.' Now the men were gone, and the walls were about to fall.

'This is our house,' Aziza wiped her tears. She began to scoop the thick liquid into the bowls. This was supposed to be her time to shine. Her oldest daughter Khadija was happily married in Gaza, her two sons were now young men. In a different life, Aziza would have found them wives and would have two young women under her roof to boss around. She would have sat on her throne, the matriarch of her kingdom and would no longer have had to lift a finger. But the Jews came from Europe and now all was gone.

She sang out loud, 'This is our house'. Her song had no rhythm, but she didn't care. There was no one left in Salamah to hear her. The Jewish paramilitary gang Haganah had launched operation *Hametz*. They dropped flyers warning the residents to leave their homes or face dire consequences. Many Palestinian towns and villages had already been ethnically cleansed by the Haganah and Irgun gangs.

‘This is our house,’ Aziza shouted again. She crushed pistachios, mixed them with cinnamon and sprinkled them on top of the thick dessert. The night before, she saw the massacres in her sleep. Women, children and men slaughtered and piled into corpses then paraded on trucks. She woke up screaming and ran outside and she saw the lines of cars leaving. Some people took furniture others ran barefooted in fear. They locked their houses and took their keys, ‘Run Aziza! The Jews are on their way’ her neighbour screamed. ‘But this is our house!’ Aziza could not run.

Aziza placed the bowls on the kitchen table and prayed for her men to return. But the Haganah arrived instead. They went inside each house in Salamah and claimed it. They took everything, even the shoes the Palestinians left behind. Two men with guns walked into Aziza’s home. Surprised to find her there they shouted at her, ‘Why are you still here? Go!’ ‘This is my house,’ Aziza broke down and cried. One man held a rifle to her head and smiled, ‘Repeat after me, King Farouk is a bastard’. Aziza couldn’t care less for the King of Egypt and for all his men. ‘Damn the King and damn you,’ she lashed out. The men laughed amused by the fighting spirit of a helpless woman. They followed the orders they were given and dragged Aziza outside, then went back inside and ate the *Riz we Haleeb* dessert. Later when they left her house, they found her squatting under a tree refusing to walk away. They shot her and left her to rot in the sun.

They say *nafas* is the most important ingredient in Palestinian cooking. Aziza put her *nafas* in the sweet thick dessert hoping it would bring back her men, but as she took her last *nafas* on earth she prayed the invaders would never enjoy a breath of air in her homeland.

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The Sheik leaned on his stick outside his home in Tuffah, his sons Karim and Rahim playing with marbles on the ground beneath him. Both sides of the street were lined with residents who waited to spot a familiar face amongst the wave of desperate humanity arriving in Gaza. Thousands of refugees marched on foot, fleeing in fear for their lives as armed Jewish gangs, the Irgun and Haganah, attacked and destroyed their homes villages and towns.

Abu-Awny walked over, holding his daughter Suhailah’s hand and followed by his sons Azmy and Awny. He greeted the Sheik who returned the greeting with a burdened heart. The

boys joined Karim and Rahim on the ground, but Suhailah stood next to her father in her frilly pink dress with her long blond curls tied up in a ponytail. The Sheik noticed how Karim smiled at her and thought to himself, 'Now the boy will be even more determined to win.'

'No news from Salamah?' Abu Awny asked. The Sheik shook his head. 'I've been standing here since morning hoping to spot someone from Salamah. We still don't know what happened to Khadija's family.' Abu Awny handed him a newspaper, 'This is the last newspaper issued in Yaffa.'

The Sheik read the front-page headline: 'Yaffa's mayor send telegram to Arab Leaders: Bury us in the sand, then bury your heads in the sand.' His eyes watered up. 'I thought the day Britain leaves this land would be a day of joy, but the *Engleez* dogs handed over the keys of our country to European Jews. They gave them everything; the official government buildings, the airport, the seaport, the military equipment the training, and now here we are.' Abu Awny sighed, 'We are witnessing the dawn of a new and darker era.'

'This won't last,' the Sheik insisted. 'The Arab armies and the resistance will defeat the invaders.'

The two men stood silent for a few minutes as they watched the endless parade of anguish and loss. The *Maghreb* call to prayer began: *Allah akbar Allah akbar*, God is Great. The voice of the *moazen* sounded more tender and emotive than ever before. The sun was setting on the British mandate of Palestine and the darkness was about to descend. The Sheik took slow steps inside his home. His walking was becoming more laborious with every passing day. The children protested because their game hadn't yet ended but they had no choice but to follow their fathers. '*Allah Akbar* God is Great,' *the Moazen* continued to call. The men headed to the mosque to pray. The women and children went inside their homes. The refugees, who weren't able to find shelter for the night, stopped their journey wherever they were and waited for the dawn.

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The sound of explosions rattled the mud brick houses. Flames flared lighting up the night's sky. Thick black smoke covered the Tuffah district. The Sheik tried to move his legs, he had a strong impulse to jump to his feet, grab his children and take them to safety, but as he

woke up, the burden of his disability jolted him back to reality. The boys trembled and cried in their sleep, afraid to open their eyes. Khadija swiftly put Muti on her breast and stretched out her arm gently patting the two boys. Moftiya rushed into their room and breathed a sigh of relief that her son and his family were alive.

Earlier that night, Moftiya had a dream she was standing between two endless rows of *sabr*, cactus trees. *Sabr* also means enduring patience in Arabic. She knew she was about to part with loved ones for a very long time. She threw her scarf over her hair and went outside to find out what was happening. When she returned, she told her son, 'The Jews bombed the railway station and other homes nearby. Most of our neighbours are leaving to a safer place.'

The Sheik reached out for his keffiyeh. 'The Jews? Now they are the Israelis,' he said, 'they are no longer rogue gangs, they've declared themselves a state on our soil. We should also leave, just for a few days until the Arab armies arrive and bring this horror to an end.'

Moftiya couldn't shake off her dream, 'This will not end quickly, and it will not end well,' she thought. She left the Sheik and Khadija in their room and went into the garden where she kept her chickens. She took good care of her chickens and never allowed anyone near them, not even her beloved grandsons. The chickens were also good to her. They produced eggs that provided her with enough money to pay for her personal needs. But convinced that the end was near, Moftiya held her chickens in her arms, and weeping, she slaughtered them.

The Sheik helped the boys get dressed while Khadija packed some necessities into a *bukjeh*, a sack made of a small blanket with its ends tied up that contained all that she could think was important for their survival; a change of clothing, a bag of flour, olives, dates and dried sycamore figs. The Sheik reached out under his mattress for his money purse holding his rainy-day savings, and he tied the purse around his waist. By the time they finished getting ready, Moftiya surprised them with a breakfast fit for kings. The Sheik was heartbroken by his mother's gesture. He understood the significance of the sacrifice she made. 'I want you to be strong on this journey,' she said as she scooped the broth over the rice and layered the chicken pieces on top. They ate silently holding back their tears. When they finished, Khadija helped the Sheik up on the donkey and handed him the *bukjeh*, grabbed Muti into her arms and told Karim and Rahim to hold on to the hem of her dress and never to let go.

Abu-Awny came to say goodbye to the Sheik. He had already sent his wife Fatima and their children to Fatima's family home in Khan Younis and he volunteered to stay in Tuffah to look after the empty houses and the elderly who might be left behind. 'May God bless you,' Moftiya told him, 'you will give me good company.' The Sheik and Khadija stared at Moftiya as she explained, 'I have decided to stay.' The Sheik protested but Moftiya was adamant, 'You must leave to protect your children, but I am too old to walk with you and only God knows how far you will have to travel and for how long you will be away.'

Tearful, the Sheik kissed her hand as she recited *ayat alkorsy* from the Quran and prayed for their safe return. The boys kissed their grandmother's hand and hugged her tight. Khadija threw herself into her arms and cried, 'I still don't know what became of my mother and now you...' Moftiya held her daughter-in-law's face in the palm of her hands and smiled '*Inshallah* you will be back in no time and you will find me standing like a sycamore tree waiting for you, or do you think I am more like the cactus?'

The Sheik and Khadija couldn't help but smile. Moftiya had never told a joke before in her life.

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Karim held on tight to his mother's dress as they walked out of Tuffah and into the big world beyond the old city. He was determined he would never abandon her again the way he did at the water well. He was convinced the *Majnoon* was in the sky, making frightening noise, dropping balls of fire, following them from street to street. He looked over at his brother Rahim who clutched his mother's dress on the other side and said, 'I'm not afraid, are you?' Rahim couldn't pretend to be brave. He just looked at his brother and then lowered his head.

Karim understood they were leaving under strange circumstances that he couldn't fully comprehend. While his parents were packing, he worked up his courage and ran outside and waited under the pomegranate tree in the open yard between their home and Abu-Awny's home hoping before leaving to catch a glimpse of Suhailah, the girl next door with the beautiful curls. But the angry sky roared as Israeli warplanes hovered above and when he closed his eyes, all he could see was the image of the *Majnoon,* 'Terror terrifying,' the *Majnoon* whispered and Karim ran back inside.

They walked for two hours at the speed of their youngest pair of feet, but eventually Rahim's four-year old feet were too tired, and exhausted, he began to cry. The Sheik told Khadija and the boys to sit down and rest by the side of the road and he rode away on his donkey. The boys watched their father leave and held on even tighter to their mother's dress. Minutes later, the Sheik returned with a cart attached to his donkey. The boys clapped happily, excited to see their father return, and even more excited to see the cart. They climbed on board the donkey cart and instantly their journey became more tolerable and far more exciting. They were distracted from their fears by the newness of the adventure. They had never gone out with both their parents before and certainly never this far away from home. With their father riding the donkey, they could pretend they were a normal family that went out on picnics every Friday afternoon.

They travelled south for days making lots of stops along the way. The spring was turning into a hot summer. The trees were loaded with fruit and many farm owners allowed the refugees to eat what they needed. They refilled their clay pots with water every time they passed a well, shared their food with groups of strangers in the fields and played with new friends at every opportunity. The boys' ears grew accustomed to the different dialects they encountered and at the end of each day, they would giggle as they tried to mimic other children they'd met, stretching their words like Yaffa boys or pronouncing 'q' as a 'k' like the peasants. Sometimes they slept in rented rooms, sometimes in the fields under the stars. But no matter where they went, the Israeli warplanes followed, and they had to move again. For the most part, the little boys coped well. For them, the world was fine as long as they had their mother's dress to hold on to and their father's wisdom to provide them with a sense of pride and security.

They finally arrived south of Khan Younis, where most families from Tuffah had agreed to gather. Abu-Awny was there to greet them. He made weekly trips back and forth from Khan Younis to Tuffah to keep an eye on his wife Fatima and their kids. He told the Sheik Israel bombed a few sites in Tuffah, but their home was spared, and that Moftiya was well. He gave the Sheik a bag full of sycamore figs that Moftiya sent for them to replenish their supplies for the days to come.

Karim was delighted to find Suhailah in Khan Younis and even more so when at night, their family and Abu-Awny's family slept together in the same place. But that happiness was

interrupted when the *Majnoon* appeared in the sky over Rafah and fear spread into the hearts of the defenseless families on the ground.

Abu-Awny was on his way back to Tuffah when he heard of the bombing of Rafah and so he rushed back to move his family. He joined the circle of men who gathered around the Sheik, hoping their wise learned Sheik could tell them what to do. The Sheik weighed the limited options they had and then said 'We should head toward the coast. There is no infrastructure there for Israel to bomb and we can survive on the fruit of the sea.'

The people of Tuffah carried their children and what few belongings they had and once again they began to move. But outside Khan Younis, the landscape changed, and the wheels of the donkey cart got stuck in the sand. The Sheik and Abu Awny had no choice but to leave the cart behind, and instead rent two camels to carry their children the rest of the journey. The idea of travelling with a camel caravan lead by the Sheik's donkey captured the children's imagination and filled their hearts with anticipation. But when the large beasts arrived, the children looked at one another nervously.

Karim wanted to impress Suhailah with his courage. 'There is nothing to be afraid of,' he said, 'Watch me, I'll be the first to sit on the camel.' Karim mounted the camel with an exaggerated show of courage, 'Suhailah sit behind me. I'll take care of you,' he declared. Smiling, Fatima quickly picked-up her daughter and sat her behind Karim. Suhailah did not protest. Not to be outdone by Karim, Awny, Azmy and Rahim bravely sat on the other camel back masking their anxiety behind frozen fake smiles. Karim's camel started to rise and Karim threw courage to the wind letting out a terrified scream; with that, all the children started to scream and cry. Their parents tried to convince them to stay on the camels but all efforts failed. And so, the two families continued their journey on foot walking behind the Sheik's donkey. Fatima, Khadija and Abu Awny took turns carrying the children who grew too tired along the way.

When they reached the coast, they found hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees as far as the eye could see. The entire coast of the Gaza strip, from Jabalia in the north to where they stood in Al Mawasi south of Khan Younis was covered with tents. The refugees were divided up in groups according to their area or town of origin. Signs were erected to help people find one anther; 'Lydd', 'Jaffa', 'Be'er Sheva' and so on. The Sheik held back his tears, 'We

are all the same here. The wealthy mansion owners and the poor peasants, the farmers and the doctors, the educated and the illiterate, we are all now refugees looking for shelter in the farthest corner of our homeland.'

It was important for the families of Tuffah to find a spot as far away from others as possible. They were known to be overly protective of their privacy. The Sheik understood that and so he led them on his donkey to Tel Zo'reb, an empty and desolate stretch of beach right next to the Egyptian border fence. Abu-Awny rested for a short period of time before he told the Sheik he was going back to Tuffah and would be coming to check on him every week. Fatima yelled at her husband, 'Wait! Don't leave me here. Take me back to my family home in Khan Younis. I'd rather die with my parents than be left here in this desolate camp away from you and from them'.

Karim was heartbroken as he watched Abu-Awny's family walk away, Suhailah on her father's shoulders, blond curls flying in the breeze.

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The Tuffah families set up their camp and with great efficiency, instantly organized tasks and assigned duties. Some men went into the sea each day at dawn and came back with nets full of sardines, others kept the peace in and around the camp, while the women gathered in circles around cooking pots and washing loads. The sheik resumed his classes, 'Education must not stop until one's heart stops,' he said, 'without education we will lose everything'. His students were not impressed. They were hoping that they would get time off from his punishing stick and his homework.

At the end of each day, while the women put the children to sleep, the men gathered outside the Sheik's tent where they listened to the news on the only radio they had, and afterwards, they listened to the Sheik's analysis and commentary. The Sheik always made Karim sit beside him. Sometimes Karim listened to the conversations, other times he fell asleep, resting his head on his father's knees.

The summer gave way to the autumn and the cold winter breeze brought further unrest and fears of a future fraught with more hardships. The men and women became restless. One

night, as they gathered outside the Sheik's tent, someone asked, 'How long must we sit here while this disaster unfolds?'

The Sheik did not have a definitive answer. All he could do was explain that by the time the Arab armies arrived with their out-dated weapons and their lack of co-ordination and training, four hundred thousand Palestinians were already ethnically cleansed from their homes. 'What we see here in Gaza is only a fraction of the disaster that has befallen our people,' he explained. 'Hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees were literally pushed into the sea in Akka and Haifa. They went into overcrowded boats and sailed away to Lebanon. Others walked on foot to Syria and Jordan. Two thirds of our people were dispossessed of everything they have. Their homes handed over to Jewish immigrants from Europe.'

The Sheik stopped talking, distracted by the figure of a man walking on the beach in their direction. When the man got closer, the Sheik recognised him. It was Abraham, Khadija's stepfather. Abraham greeted the men and sat quietly next to the Sheik. The Sheik took in a deep breath before he asked, 'Where is Aziza?'

Abraham looked into the fire. His face was hardened by the horrors he had witnessed. 'Salamah put up a good fight,' he said, 'but we were poorly equipped, with one rifle for every four fighters. We took turns guarding our town but the flight of Palestinians from Jewish terrorists and the horror stories that spread about the massacres the Jews committed caused great panic. Everyone in Salamah locked their homes, grabbed their keys and ran.'

'Aziza?' The Sheik asked a second time.

'We weren't there when this happened,' Abraham continued. 'We, the fighters, were told to wait for the Egyptian authorities at a designated meeting place. They were supposed to give us more weapons. We were ready to fight with them and the other Arab forces. But the Egyptian forces came and took our weapons from us and told us to go home. They didn't want local militias interfering with their operations. They disarmed us and left us there with nothing. We rushed back to Salamah, but it was under Israeli control. The soldiers forced us to keep on walking south toward Gaza. On the way, I ran into one of our neighbours. She told me Aziza did not leave. No one has seen her since.'

A gut-wrenching scream was heard inside the Sheik's tent 'Yumma! Yumma!' Khadija wailed.

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The winter of 1948 was bitter. The wind blew over the tents of the refugees, cloaking them with salt and sand. The divided Arab armies made no gains on the war front against Israel, now a recognised state backed by powerful international actors, with a seat at the UN and a Jewish population eager to believe that this land was without a people for a people without a land.

The men huddled around the fire outside the Sheik's tent. They fiddled with the radio until it picked up the signal and listened intently to the news, but the winter wind brought the broadcaster's voice in inconsistent waves 'The Zionist state's… their air force…. Bombing Rafah… Gaza has fallen…' the signal was gone. The men could hear the sound of Israeli planes in the distance bombing Rafah. Panic and fear spread 'Gaza has fallen?' 'Have we just lost our homes?' 'Where do we go now?' the men got up determined to save their families. They agreed to run across the border into Egypt. The Sheik tried to persuade them not to. 'Wait,' he urged them 'think this through. We are in the farthest corner of our homeland. Israel is not allowing anyone who leaves to return. You want to run into the Sinai dessert? How will you survive in the dessert?' But in the heat of the panic, no one was listening to the Sheik. The men rushed to their tents and began to pack.

Inside the Sheik's tent, Khadija began to gather their things, but the Sheik put his hand on hers and said 'Don't. We're not leaving.' Khadija couldn't understand, 'How do we stay here alone? We are in the middle of nowhere? How will we survive without the others? Who will bring us food? Who will fish? Who…' Khadija's flood of tears seemed to have no end. The Sheik held her and said, 'If you want to leave we will leave. But this means I will ride the donkey and will carry all of our things. You will carry Muti. Karim is old enough to walk long distances. But what would we do with Rahim? If we go, we must leave Rahim behind'.

Khadija screamed 'No!' and threw herself on Rahim, who was sleeping, oblivious to the world that seemed to be falling in pieces around him. 'I won't leave him if I have to die'. The Sheik laid down on his mattress and pulled Khadija into his arms. 'They left without even

saying goodbye. All our friends and neighbours have families to look after and their own burdens to carry. But we must have faith in God's mercy. We will all stay. Either we live together or together we die.'

They held on to one another and fell asleep to the noise of people outside taking down their tents and belongings and fleeing in the dark night in a desperate bid for survival. When they woke up in the morning, all they could hear was the sound of the whistling wind and the whooshing of the waves. Khadija fought back her tears. She tried hard to hold on to the image of the angel of fortune. He promised her that her boys would have a long life. He promised she would see her grandchildren. 'Dear God of mercy, don't abandon us,' she prayed.

They managed the first two days to survive on what little supply they had of sycamore figs and dates but at the end of the second day Khadija told the Sheik, 'We only have two dates left. There is nothing to feed the boys. What will we do tomorrow?' The Sheik gently held her hand 'Abu Awny is due for his weekly visits. He is probably on his way.' But Abu-Awny was not there the next day. Khadija gave Karim and Rahim one date each, nursed Muti with whatever remained in her breast of liquid and waited.

That night, strong winds rattled their tent and an angry sea splashed it with foam and sand. There was thunder and lightning in the sky. Too hungry to scream, the boys moved closer to one another, each of them tightening their grip on the part of their parents' garment they had access to. Their parents were like a life-raft and they were floating in an angry cold ocean of hunger and uncertainty. When the storm ended, they were exhausted from the anxiety and fell asleep.

On their third morning of abandonment and unspoken regrets, Khadija and the Sheik stayed under the blankets, whispering prayers they hoped would be received. Karim and Rahim gathered what they could of energy and went outside. Minutes later Khadija heard their energized voices rising with excitement and laughter. She wrapped herself in her blanket, stepped out of the tent and let out a joyful scream. She rushed back in and handed the Sheik his cane. 'Get up, you have to see this. It's a miracle. Our prayers have been answered. God was listening. Get up!' She helped the Sheik on his feet and out of the tent. The two of them stood bewildered watching Karim and Rahim feasting on red apples while running between more than a dozen broken crates of apples that the storm had delivered to their shore.

The apples sustained the Sheik's family on the third and fourth days; the Tuffah families returned on the fifth. They apologized to the Sheik and his wife for abandoning them and explained that the falling of Gaza turned out to be a false rumour due to the interruption of the radio broadcast. 'The Egyptian army now has full control of Gaza. It did not fall under Israel's occupation,' they explained, 'Egypt and Israel have declared a ceasefire.' The Sheik smiled wearily. 'It is time for us to go home.'

Abu-Sa'adah's son Salem brought with him a Palestinian flag that he hoisted on a stick and he raised as they began their walk back to Gaza with the Sheik leading them on his donkey. When they passed by the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees who came from areas that were declared a Jewish state, they thought of how fortunate they were to be returning to their homes and they prayed their brothers and sisters in these camps would also be allowed to return one day. That day never came.

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The Sheik with his sons Abdul Karim, Abdul Rahim, Abdul Muti and Abdul Latif in Tuffah District, Gaza, Palestine c. 1952

September
Bahloul the clown herds the clouds with his stick
he hangs his *gombaz* trousers on the rooftops
and lights a fire in the granite oven
its sparks ignite two thunder bolts in the sky
Gaza's two braids fall beneath her shoulders
and black kohl line her eyes
she sings two *mowals* from her wounded heart
one for happiness and one for sorrow
September
hills of Guava and dates
a horse chases a cloud
sprinting he spreads his mane
and a baby goat learns to play
September is wet
and Gaza is busy chopping red chilies
pouring olive oil into clay pots
dangling from the ceiling strings of okra, onions and garlic
and storing noodles, dried Molokhyah and couscous in its jars
September is here and winter is near
Gaza listens to the roaring of thunder
a breeze caresses her breast
desire wakes up in the hearts of young girls
and yearnings for first promises
and first bunches of flowers that the boys picked
September is wet and Gaza is busy
buying textbooks and pencils
and mending school uniforms

Abdul Karim Sabawi

(5)

RESURRECTION: PALESTINE 1949 – 1950

Words died on the journey home. The adults dragged their feet in silence past clusters of dispossession and misery. Karim and Rahim held on to their mother's dress and breathed in the sorrow that hung thick in the air. Something was forever lost. Karim, who had just turned six, kept looking behind him, searching for what was missing. The dress was there, the mother, the father, Rahim and baby Muti, they were all there, the world appeared the same – but even in his young eyes, nothing was the same.

The procession passed through Deir Al Balah. The high date palms gave them fresh supplies of nutrients. But they ate with no appetite for food or conversation. Beneath the trees, the earth was planted with refugees. Some slept in tents, some on blankets, some lay on the bare ground. A woman called out the name of a child she could not find. A man wept under a tree next to his dead mother. An old man stared at them and stared through them, his lips repeating a prayer, '*hasby allah we na'm alwakeel*, God will suffice and in him I trust.'

When they finally arrived in Tuffah after almost nine months of flight, the Sheik's family turned into the small alleyway that lead to their home. They were confronted by the evidence of the passage of time and the tyranny of neglect. The gate to their home was almost completely concealed behind a thick façade of tall grass and wild plants, with only a narrow clearing on the side, enough for one person to walk through. They squeezed through the clearing and finally stood in their front yard.

Moftiya ran out of her room and threw her arms around her son. She inhaled his scent and stared into his face repeating over and over '*Alhamdulillah* praise be to God.' Karim and Rahim competed for space in Moftiya's arms, wedging themselves between her and the Sheik, each trying to grab one of her hands to kiss. She finally came down on her knees and ran her hands over their shoulders and along their arms. She ruffled their hair and examined their little fingers, kissing them one by one, then she stood up and hugged Khadija. Taking baby Muti into her arms, she asked 'Can he walk yet?' Khadija nodded. 'Good!' Moftiya said, as she placed her hand on Khadija's belly. 'You'll have the next one by the winter *inshallah*.' Moftiya

smiled at her son, ‘I see nothing stops you. Not even the war!’ Khadija and the Sheik smiled, stretching faces hardened after long months of dejection.

Moftiya went into the garden and brought back a basket full of zucchinis, onions, lemons and hot chilies. She sat down with the Sheik and the two had begun to chop the vegetables when Abu-Awny and Fatima dropped by for a visit. Abu-Awny was not pleased to find the Sheik helping the women with food preparations. ‘Now you will open up Fatima’s eyes,’ he told the Sheik ‘She will expect me to do the same.’ But Fatima’s eyes were already open. She had often admired the way the Sheik helped Khadija with cooking. ‘May God give you a long life and keep you glowing like a crown above their heads,’ Fatima told the Sheik before she gave her husband Abu-Awny a deadly stare. The Sheik thanked her and wanted to change the topic, so he said, ‘You know what would go well with these vegetables? *Khobeeza* from the garden.’

Fatima and Khadija went outside to harvest *Khobeeza*, or mallow, an edible weed that had fiercely covered the ground along the pathway between their homes. The two women took their time picking out the best leaves while they swapped stories of relentless husbands who managed to steal private moments of pleasure even in the worst of times, or as Fatima declared, ‘Especially in the worst of times!’ And as the two women calculated their due dates and rubbed one another’s bellies, they noticed that Karim had reclaimed his romantic spot under the pomegranate tree, where he waited patiently for Suhailah to emerge. When she finally did, Khadija and Fatima watched on as Karim offered her a handshake. Hesitantly, Suhailah gave him her hand. But when Karim held on longer than he should have, the nervous girl pulled her hand away and ran back inside her home. Her mother triumphantly proclaimed, ‘Good girl!’ The two women laughed out loud, but Karim did not care. He was utterly content for at last having touched the hand of the girl of his dreams.

In the evening, the smell of *Khobeeza* stews cooking in many of the homes in Tuffah mingled in the air over Mohatta street, marking a celebration of a return to life. After dinner, the Sheik’s family went to sleep in the same order as before, but Karim could not sleep. His mind raced with an endless stream of questions and many disturbing thoughts. He would learn many years later that what his young eyes witnessed since the spring of 1948 was *al-Nakba*, the catastrophe that marked the establishment of an Israeli Jewish state on the soil of his homeland. But while it was happening, there was no name for it. There were no words to

explain it. The images of that year flashed before his eyes. Unforgettable, sad faces in ragged tents, homeless families in the fields, young mothers and children sleeping under the trees, Khadija crying on an empty beach praying for God's mercy – and always, the fear of the *Majnoon* in the sky and the possibility of terror on the ground. These images and memories would haunt him forever, reminding him of what it means to lose everything. Reminding him of what it means to die and still be breathing.

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Gaza's population tripled as refugees from other parts of Palestine crowded its landscape. Everyone, including the locals, struggled to find work and to adjust to the new post war reality. Cut off from the rest of Palestine, the economy was severed, and merchants in Gaza could no longer travel to, or trade with, cities that fell inside the borders of the newly created state of Israel. Also, most of the *fellaheen*, the farmers, no longer had access to their fields, as most of Gaza's agricultural land became part of Israel.

The Sheik waited for the summer to end, and for the new school year to begin, hoping his classes would generate some income. Until then, his family, like many others, managed to survive on edible weeds, spicing their stews with lemons, onions and chilies from their garden.

One late summer morning, the Sheik of Tuffah woke up early and wore his best clothes and headgear. He told Khadija to make Karim as presentable as possible: 'Today, I will take him out on a special journey. I will teach my son how to go to school and what landmarks to pay attention to along the way.' Khadija let out an ululation that echoed throughout the Tuffah district and beyond. She was so happy that she had finally made it through her parenting journey despite everything they had been through and had arrived at this big milestone; her oldest son was ready for school!

Khadija washed Karim's face, combed his hair, dusted off his sandals and tied the broken leather straps in a double knot. She planted a kiss on his cheek and went outside to untie the donkey, but the Sheik stopped her. 'You don't have to do this anymore,' he said. 'From this day on, this is Karim's job.' Karim was both terrified and happy. He untied the donkey, brought it over to the Sheik and helped his father push his foot into the stirrup. The Sheik lifted his weight on the back of the donkey, and together, father and son left the house,

Khadija and Moftiya stood at the door and waved goodbye. Tears of joy filled their eyes and immeasurable pride overflowed in their hearts.

Karim took fast steps to keep up with his father's donkey, curling his toes to ensure his broken sandals didn't come flying off. Along Mohatta Street, they passed by the vegetable sellers under the giant Tamarix tree, yelling 'Watermelon waiting for your knife.' 'Red tomatoes sweet and ripe.' 'Eggplants! Grill them! Stuff them! Marinate them! Fry them!' They continued their journey passed the farms where Karim and his mother used to fill their water jugs and Karim cringed at the memory of the *Majnoon*.

As they approached the *Sedra*, an ancient tree that stood at the centre of the fork in the road, the Sheik slowed down. 'Remember this tree, Karim,' said the Sheik as he rode his donkey under its shade for a short rest, 'It has a very special story!' Karim sat down and leaned his back on the wide tree trunk. 'Can you tell me the story?' he asked his father as he fiddled with his broken sandal strap. The Sheik patted his donkey who was enjoying the shade and the tall grass beneath the tree and began: 'Centuries ago, a holy man, a *walee*, a servant of Said Hashem, the grandfather of prophet Mohamad, peace be upon him, fell asleep right here' – the Sheik pointed at the ground where Karim was sitting – 'And he never woke up. When the locals found him, they buried him in the same spot'. Karim jumped to his feet and stepped away from the tree. The Sheik laughed as he coaxed the donkey to start moving again, 'This special tree is an important landmark that will help you find your way from school and back. Now follow me!'

They continued up the hill along the rubble of Gaza's ancient city walls, passed the mosque of Said Hashem where it is believed that the prophet Mohammad's grandfather is buried, and turned left in their up climb, into an arched street. Karim held his breath in amazement as he observed how the upper floors of the historic large houses on both sides stretched over the street, like hanging bridges. Each house had a large wooden door. Beside the doors were big circular stone tubs and iron poles to tie the horses. 'We call these houses *sobat*,' the Sheik explained, 'They were built during the Mameluke era hundreds of years ago. Nowadays they belong to the families of the rich merchants of Gaza city'.

Karim looked at the balconies hanging above and their intricate carved wood exterior and wondered if anyone inside was watching him, so he straightened up his shoulders and tried to look more like a man.

They left the street and kept walking uphill until they saw it, sitting on top of the hill. The School of Hashem Bin Abed Manaf! The Sheik looked at his son with gleaming eyes, 'This is your school!'

'*Yabba*, it looks so beautiful!' Karim exclaimed, imagining himself walking up and down its stairs carrying his school bag. 'It used to be a mansion built by the Ottomans.' His father said, 'The English turned it into a police station. Now that Gaza is officially under Egypt's control, the Egyptians have turned it into a primary school' The Sheik took a few minutes to rest while the jubilant Karim ran up the stairs of the school and back to his father panting with excitement.

'Tell me', the Sheik said to his son 'What do you see when you stand with your back to the front gate of your school?' Karim turned his back to the gate and looked into the distance, 'A dome.' 'Yes, but this is not any dome,' the Sheik said. 'This is the shrine of Abualazzem, the father of courage! People believe Abualazzem is Samson, the Israelite who in ancient times fell in love with a Gazan woman named Delilah, while sneaking into the city to destroy its temple. Gazans built this shrine on top of what they believe are the remains of the old temple that Samson destroyed.' The Sheik saw Karim was no longer paying attention, and he thought to himself 'Maybe I've burdened the boy with the weight of four thousand years of history,' He patted his donkey on the neck and coaxed it to move 'Let's keep going son. There is one last surprise for you.'

The Sheik took Karim to the nearby Fehmy Beek street, named after the first mayor of Gaza under the Ottoman empire. Karim's appetite was taunted by the delicious smell of food and the sweet fragrance of dessert emanating from the endless cafes that lined the street. The Sheik felt inside his money purse. Even though he knew money was a scarce commodity that he must not spend on frivolous things, he wanted to make this outing with his son as special as possible. He knew that his declining ability to walk would not permit him to make such a journey again. He told Karim to tie the donkey and help him down. Leaning on his stick, the Sheik took his son to a café.

The Sheik justified the outing as one of life's important lessons. 'I want you to learn how to carry yourself in a place like this.' He taught Karim how to sit down on a chair in a café, how to place an order and how to pay at the end. It was on that glorious day that Karim tasted *shish kebabs* for the first time in his life, delicious grilled minced lamb mixed with onions and parsley arranged on sticks and barbecued. Even in the best of times, meat was rare in the mostly vegetarian diet that the poor people of Tuffah were accustomed to. It was only eaten on very special occasions.

As Karim helped his father back on the donkey, the Sheik pleaded with his son: 'I wanted to bring you here, so you are not tempted to come to explore it by yourself. This street, as you can see, has automobiles. They are dangerous killing machines. So, I want you to swear to me on God's name you will never come here without my permission.'

'I swear *wallahi!'* Karim responded affectionately seeing how worried his father seemed. As they made their way home, Karim kept looking behind him, fighting the urge to run back to the café and eat more of the delicious *shish kebabs*.

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Karim opened his eyes well before the Tuffah roosters began to crow. He didn't know if the surge of emotion washing over him was anxiety or anticipation. He wished he could sneak into his mother's mattress and dive into her arms, but knew if he were to, she would scold him and push him away, reminding him that he was a young man now. A six-year old young man!

The call for the dawn prayer announced the beginning of the day. Karim was relieved it was finally time for everyone else to wake up. Khadija and the Sheik stretched and yawned, and in a synchronized familiar pattern, Khadija stood up and helped the Sheik up on his feet. She fetched the water jug and began with the Sheik the ritual of ablution in preparation for prayer. They washed their hands, arms, face and feet, their lips set in rhythm, uttering words of grace and gratitude to the great almighty. Karim happily joined them for the first time, desperately hoping his fast beating heart would find comfort and solace in the calmness and serenity of prayers.

The Sheik lead the prayer seated on a chair; Khadija and Karim behind him, stood, bowed, prostrated and contemplated the oneness of God. After prayer, Khadija lit the *Saj* stove and began to bake the dough she had kneaded the previous night. The Sheik asked Karim to fetch three red chilies, two ripe tomatoes, four basil leaves and one lemon from the tree in the garden. It was still dark outside, but Karim, the six-year old man, was not afraid. To prove it, he decided it was time to confront the pesky gekkonidae lizards who inhabited the exterior walls of his home. Hands planted on his waist, feet rooted in the ground, he faced the lizards and glared into their eyes. The lizards responded to his act of defiance by shaking their heads and rolling out their tongues. 'I am a man now. I'm going to school,' Karim told the creatures before he stuck his tongue back at them, shook his head and walked away.

Later that morning, as Karim watched his father crush the fresh hot chilies in the clay mortar with a pestle, he finally asked, 'Yubba, why are you sending me to a government school?' The Sheik was never one to give an answer without taking his time to dig deep into his lore and to arrange an eloquent and informative response. 'The prophet Mohammad, peace be upon him, said we must seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave.' The Sheik added lemon and fresh basil into the mortar and continued to crush the ingredients into a fine paste. 'But Yubba,' Karim persisted, 'I am learning here, at your school. You have taught me how to write and read. You have taught me religion and classical poetry and...' The Sheik smiled, 'Son, above every scholar there is a higher scholar. I can only teach you what I know. I may know many things, but I do not know everything. Learning is a lifetime process and a good student is one who seeks knowledge from a variety of sources. The Muslim scholar Imam El-Shafi'i said that a man is only knowledgeable for as long as he seeks knowledge. Once he believes he knows everything it is then that he falls into ignorance.'

Annoyed by his father's constant lecturing, Karim sighed and surrendered. He put on his school clothes and ate his breakfast with his brothers quietly, washing down the burning chilies and tomato salad with water and as much bread as he could stuff into his mouth. When it was time for him to leave, his mother gave him a pair of black leather shoes to wear. All his life he had worn sandals; he found the leather shoes terribly uncomfortable, but he sucked in the discomfort, carried his knapsack, kissed his father's hand goodbye and made one last plea. '*Yubba*, can I have some money to buy a falafel sandwich for lunch? Awny told me they sell delicious falafel sandwiches at school'

The Sheik had no money at all in his money purse. He would start making money when he began his teaching classes later that morning, but until then, they were all out of money. ‘Your mother made a Za’ater sandwich for you. It is in your bag,’ he told his son.

Karim’s anger and anxiety finally got the better of him. He exploded. ‘I’ve been eating Za’ater sandwiches every day my whole life. I am so sick of this. I want to eat what other students eat. I want falafel.’ He threw his knapsack on the floor and stormed out of the house. ‘I am not going to school!’ he shouted as he ran out into the street.

Khadija stood frozen, shocked by her son’s lack of manners and his angry outburst. She looked at the Sheik and couldn’t understand why her husband was smiling. ‘Make us some tea,’ the Sheik said, ‘Karim is growing up and he has much to learn. His first lesson has already begun.’

Soon after Karim left, the Sheik’s students began to arrive. The Sheik called on his oldest and tallest student, Salem, and told him to go out into the street, find Karim and bring him home. Karim had not wandered too far. He sat in the alley outside his home and watched the endless stream of students making their way to school along Mohatta Street. And though he was sorry for his outburst, he was too stubborn to go home. When he saw Salem walk toward him, he knew his civil disobedience stunt was over.

Karim stood before his father, head lowered in shame, and contemplated which punishment he would be receiving. Would his father order him to stretch out his hand for a smack with the walking stick, or would he order him to stand disgraced in the corner? But the Sheik did neither. He spoke in a measured tone. ‘I will not punish you. You are not on my watch right now. You are a student of a government school. You are the responsibility of that school’s principal.’ The Sheik tuned to Salem and asked him to take Karim to school and to hand him over to the principal. ‘Tell the principal you found this boy sitting in the street and refusing to go to school.’

Karim was petrified. This was the worst punishment possible. His school principal would have a bad impression of him on the very first day. He would forever be thought of as the bad student who runs away from classes. Karim dedicated every minute on the way to the

school begging Salem for mercy. ‘Please Salem, let me get inside the school by myself. Don’t tell the principal you found me in the street.’ By the time they arrived at the steps of the school, Salem’s heart had softened, and he allowed Karim to enter on his own. Karim made it inside just before the first school bell rang.

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‘Rise!’ the teacher commanded, ‘All students must rise whenever a teacher walks into the classroom.’ The students quickly stood up, their eyes glued to the big wooden ruler the teacher waved in his hand, vowing in their hearts to do whatever was necessary to avoid becoming intimately acquainted with that painful instrument. ‘My name is *Ostath* Omar Naeem.’ The teacher scribbled his name on the blackboard. ‘Good morning class!’ The students responded in one voice, ‘Good morning teacher!’

Ostath Naeem spent the first period instilling fear in the hearts of his students, explaining rules, expectations and the school system of rewards and punishments. In the second period, he sat down and asked his students to exhibit their knowledge, ‘Have any of you memorized any ballads, poems or songs you’d like to share?’ he asked as his eyes scanned the faces of his fearful subjects. Everyone’s hands went up. All students were eager to appease their teacher. Karim also raised his hand, but *Ostath* Naeem picked many others before him. Some students sang nursery rhymes like, ‘I am a country duck, I swim in the middle of the lake,’ and ‘We three together are going on a picnic.’ Others sang ballads from Arabic folklore like, ‘I am a believer in God. Your beauty is a sign of God.’ Karim’s arm was getting sore, but he remained steadfast and kept it raised until finally the *Ostath* noticed him, and the little boy from Tuffah stood up and performed, in perfect grammar, a long classical Arabic poem, consisting of twenty stanzas. The bell rang and Karim’s poem hadn’t ended.

Ostath Naeem rushed Karim to principal Hanna Farah’s office. Interrupting a meeting the principle had with other teachers, the *Ostath* urged him to listen to this wonder child. When Principal Farah gave him a nod, *Ostath* Naeem lifted Karim and stood him on the chair across from the principal’s desk, enthusiastically gesturing to the little boy to continue the poem. Karim was happy to oblige. Principal Farah was thoroughly impressed. ‘Do you know any other classical poems?’ he asked Karim. ‘Yes,’ Karim said, ‘I know many.’ Karim shared with his audience his list of classical Arabic poets whom he admired. The principal gave him a

newspaper to test his literacy, and Karim read it fluently. ‘Where did you learn all of that?’ the astonished principal asked. ‘I am Sheik Hussein’s son.’ But neither the principal nor any of the teachers who gathered around Karim had ever heard of the Sheik. This came as a shock to the boy who believed his father was the most important scholar on the planet. Frustrated by their ignorance, Karim had to explain, ‘My father runs a school in our house, *Madrasat Srour Alatfal*.’ ‘So, your home is a school!’ the principal smiled, ‘Well, that explains it! This boy is a genius!’ he told *Ostath* Naeem, ‘Put him in grade three’.

Karim squeezed *Ostath* Naeem’s hand as they stepped into the grade three classroom. The *Ostath* looked at the older students and then back at Karim, and he couldn’t help but smile when he saw Karim’s finger desperately searching the space above his upper lip for any sign of a potential moustache; there was none. Many students in grade three had started to grow facial hair. They were bigger older rougher boys. Karim felt vulnerable and small, tears began to well up in his eyes. *Ostath* Naeem didn’t have the heart to leave him in such company, so after checking back with the principal, it was decided that Karim would begin his school journey in grade two instead.

When the last bell rang, Karim took off his leather boots, tied their straps together, slung them over his neck, and ran barefoot all the way home. He was so eager to share the triumphs and tribulations of his first day of school with his parents, he ignored the discomfort and pain of the sharp stones and twigs that dug into the soles of his feet. When he finally stepped through the front gate into the garden, his grandmother Moftiya intercepted him. ‘Karim, come over here.’ Moftiya was fixing the wiring of her chicken coop. The Sheik had promised to give her money to buy new chickens as soon as he collected the fees from his students. Karim let out a big sigh, threw his bag under the pomegranate tree and ran over to help his grandmother. ‘Karim!’ He heard his mother shout from the house ‘Come and eat first. Your grandmother’s coop can wait.’

Moftiya was outraged! She insisted, ‘Karim, you’ll stand here and finish the job.’ Khadija waddled out of the house, panting for breath, ‘The boy just came back from school,’ she yelled at Moftiya, ‘Have a heart.’ As Khadija’s belly grew, so did her temper. Every day that brought her closer to her due date was another reminder that her mother was forever gone. She wondered who would be there for her when she had the baby? Who would stand up to Moftiya to ensure she gets enough rest? Who would offer her the comfort and wisdom of

generations of women? She became defiant of Moftiya and ready to fight with her almost all the time. Moftiya was neither impressed by Khadija's new behaviour nor was she threatened by it. She mostly rose above it and allowed Khadija's emotional storms to pass. She gestured to Karim to go, mumbling the proverbial wisdom, 'They asked the Pharaoh who made you a tyrant? He said, no one tried to stop me.'

That night, the Sheik heard Khadija's tears falling on the pillow. He squeezed her hand and she whispered, 'I don't even know if my mother was buried. I don't know if she has a grave.' The Sheik sighed, 'May God have mercy on her soul.' Karim rolled over on his mattress facing the wall, and he too let his tears fall.

In the morning, while they made their spicy tomato and chilies salad for breakfast, Karim told his father the details of his first day of school, and how impressed his teachers were. The Sheik's heart expanded with pleasure almost to the point of agony. But his pride in his son was soon replaced with fear of the evil eye of envy. He told Karim, 'You must not boast of your intelligence. You must always be humble.' The Sheik reached into his money purse, which was replenished at last with the return of the school year and handed Karim a coin. 'This is for your falafel sandwich!'

Karim managed to run all the way to school with his clenched hand firmly stuck in his pocket, clasping the coin, and his stomach dreaming of the taste of bliss that awaited him. He loved food and was at an age when his body demanded to be fed all day long. But there were constant obstacles to the pleasures of relishing a well-cooked meal. His family were poor, so the ingredients they had were limited to grains and vegetable stews. This was made worse by the fact that Khadija was not a good cook; she had not inherited her mother's *nafas*. And if it weren't for the Sheik's added touches to her stews, Karim and his brothers would not have enjoyed eating at all. This left Karim in a constant state of craving better food, and richer variety.

With eyes glued to the classroom clock, his mouth as dry as the Sinai desert, Karim sat still and waited. The morning periods passed slowly. The teachers came and went. Words were written on the blackboard, and others were erased. Questions were asked, voices were raised, laughter, silence, clapping – but none of this interrupted Karim's train of thoughts as he sat

still, in an unusual state of quiet anticipation. When the lunch bell finally rang, Karim wet his lips with his tongue and he bolted out the classroom.

Within minutes, Karim was sitting on the bench in the school yard next to his new friends, his classmates Raja'a and William. He unwrapped the warm paper and pulled out the hot falafel sandwich. He thought the moment had finally arrived to live the dream, but Ahmad AlJaro, a boy from Tuffah district and a former student of the Sheik's school, suddenly appeared in front of him and demanded to have the sandwich. Ahmad was known for his thuggery, but Karim resisted, refusing to give up his sandwich. So, Ahmad leaned forward and whispered in Karim's ear the one word that brought Karim down on his knees in humiliating defeat: 'Khadija.'

Karim knew there was nothing shameful about the name Khadija. The first wife of the Prophet of Islam, Mohammad, (Peace be upon Him), was named Khadija. He also knew that there was nothing shameful about being a mother; in fact, according to the holy Quran, 'Heaven is at the feet of mothers.' But Karim understood that there is great shame for boys in the schoolyard to know the name of his mother. If this information got out, he would never be known as Karim, students would forever taunt him by calling him Khadija. Such disgrace is one that could not be redeemed with a thousand and one falafels, even if they were the sesame coated kind. Knowing that Ahmad was armed with the most lethal of weapons, Karim handed him the sandwich and bent his head to hide his tears. When Raja'a and William offered to share their lunch with him he was too upset and humiliated to accept their kindness.

At home, he threw his knapsack on the floor and sat in the corner sulking.

'What is wrong with you?' Khadija asked as she boiled the piles of white cotton nappies that she was preparing for the new arrival.

'Ahmad AlJaro. He took my sandwich.' Karim looked up at his mother and his anger exploded. 'He knew your name. KHADIJA,' he shouted dramatically expecting his mother to fall apart, to cry, to share the burden of the shame of it all. Instead Khadija continued to stir the pot of boiling nappies while smiling from ear to ear. 'Ahmad has always been a bully,' she said. 'He is just like his mother. The woman is so rude, she has a long tongue that stretches from here to the Sedra.' Khadija stopped stirring and turned to Karim, looking into his eyes as

if handing him a very dangerous weapon. ‘Ahmad’s mother’s name is Mottya. Whisper that in his ear next time you get hungry for falafel.’

The following day, Karim bought his sandwich and sat on the bench with his friends. Within seconds, Ahmad showed up to collect his lunch, but this time Karim gestured to him to come forward and he whispered in his ear, ‘Mottya’. With that, Ahmad fled the scene. Ten wild horses would not have caught him. Karim savoured his falafel, grateful that his mother had saved the day!

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Autumn made way for the arrival of a cold and temperamental winter. The rain storm began with a few drops in the morning as children made their way to school. Karim lifted his bag over his head and smiled at the sight of younger boys in the street who stuck out their tongues to taste the rain. By the time Karim arrived at the school, the rain had become a downpour. The morning assembly in the schoolyard was cancelled and all students were rushed straight into the classrooms. Karim’s first period was Quran studies, but the religion teacher, *Ostath* Rabah ElRayes, was caught up in the heavy rain and never made it to school. Principal Hanna Farah took his place. Even though he was Christian, the principal was known for his flawless recitation of the holy Quranic verses and for his ability to bring out the beauty, rhythm and poetry of the sacred text.

The principal’s eyes were drawn to the window and the puddles of water that were accumulating in the schoolyard. ‘Good morning class!’ The students responded with one voice, ‘Good morning principal Hanna’. The principal sat down and reached out for the Quran, his mind already made up. ‘I believe it is most appropriate today to learn the story of Prophet Noah, may Allah’s blessings and mercy be upon him.’

Principal Hanna tried hard to keep the students focused, but as he recited the verse “‘O Earth! Swallow up your water, and O sky! Withhold (your rain)’ the sound of the rain outside drowned his melodic voice, and the cascade of water falling against the glass windows warned of flooded streets and falling mud roofs. He told the students to go home and announced the closure of the school.

Parents lined up outside ready to escort their little ones back home. Karim's friends William and Raja'a offered him a ride in William's father's Buick Roadmaster, but Karim was too embarrassed to accept. He worried the fancy car would get stuck in the muddy streets of Tuffah. It didn't take long for everyone to disappear and for Karim to find himself standing alone. He gathered his courage and ran down the school steps, totally immersing himself into a torrent of cold water. He repeated to himself, 'I am a man. I am not afraid. I am a man. I am not afraid.' But Karim was not a man, he was a child – trembling, cold and afraid. His tears poured down with the rain.

At the bottom of the hill, near the Sedra, the water became deeper. He closed his eyes and prayed. Suddenly he was scooped into a warm blanket; arms held him tight and lips pressed hard against his forehead. '*Habeeby ya ibny*, my beloved son,' Khadija's voice whispered into his ears. Karim was bewildered. His mother hadn't carried him since he was two years old. How could she carry him now? She was eight months pregnant and he was almost seven years old.

Khadija carried Karim through floodwater all the way home, and in an unusual display of love and tenderness, she dried and doted on him. She helped him change into warm clothes and sat with him by the fire. Karim would remember this day forever; how a mother's instinct to protect her children can turn her into a force of nature.

**

The rain stopped in the final hours of 1949, and snow accompanied the arrival of a new year. White fluff covered the mud homes and green cactus hedges for the first time in decades. Karim was mesmerised by the beauty and uniqueness of each falling snowflake and how the sheets of snow transformed old familiar sites into new magical ones. Most of all, he was struck by the way the snow illuminated the darkness of night. 'Run Karim,' his father rushed him. 'Try not to fall on the way, the snow is slippery'.

Karim ran with careful steps along Mohatta Street. He was on a mission to fetch the midwife. His mother's contractions had begun and though the midwife arrived quickly that night, the baby did not. Khadija's labour lasted through the night and into the next morning, and so did the snowfall. Tired of the waiting, the Sheik stepped outside, leaning on his cane

and breathed in the crisp winter morning. His sons were enjoying a snow fight against the neighbours' boys. Their joyous cries blended in with Khadija's screams for mercy and the midwife's cheers; '*Yallah*! *Yallah*! Push! We're almost there!'

The Sheik looked at his donkey. The loyal beast was in high spirits, shaking his head while savouring the snow with heightened pleasure. 'You too Brutus!' the Sheik reprimanded the donkey. 'You too are enjoying the snow, and ignoring what it means to our brothers and sisters in the refugee camps?' The Sheik took in a deep breath and sighed, '*Alhamdolelah!*' Praise be to God for His kindness.' He was grateful to the Almighty who in times of hardships had giving them a warm home, healthy sons and plenty of coal to keep their fire burring on this cold day.

By noon, the Sheik and Khadija welcomed a newborn baby boy. They named him Abdul Latif, worshipper of the Kind God.

Although 1949 was a year of *Osra* and hardship, it was also a year of acts of kindness. Palestinian locals were kind to the refugees and the Palestinian earth breathed kindness to all of its indigenous people, gifting them with nutritious wild plants like mallow, endives and sorrel, while its sea embraced the ancient city, filling the nets of its fishermen with more sardines than any other year. So, despite the cold and wet winter, at least hunger and mass starvation were kept at bay, and Gaza, the old city, was once again stirred toward its resurrection.

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Fatima and Khadija Tuffah District, Gaza, Palestine c. 1958

Mother,

Your tenderness returns us to our youth
We become children again
Holding on to the hem of your dress
Waiting for the old mills to turn
For the abundant harvest
For the sweet dates to fall beneath the palm trees
For your hands to bake the bread
And feed the hungry

Abdul Karim Sabawi

(6)

THE BOY…THE MAN: PALESTINE 1950

The boys took turns stepping in and out of the portable iron tub. Khadija poured the water and savoured the sensation of the cool drops that bounced off their heads onto her dress, a much-welcomed reprieve from the heat. 'How fast time flies!' She thought to herself. Tonight, her boys would be the centre of attention. She must scrub and clean them, so they are ready, and she must remember to protect them from the evil eye of envy. She filled the bucket with more water and recited the Dawn prayer as she rinsed their scrawny bodies, '…I seek refuge from the God of Dawn; from the mischief of created things; and from the mischief of those who practice secret arts; and from the mischief of the envious ones…'

'Khadija,' Moftiya's harsh grating voice called out through the thin wall. 'Don't forget *to say the Shihada* to fend off the evil spirits.'

Khadija resented how involved her mother in-law was in the minute details of her daily life. With what was clearly an irritable tone she shouted the *Shihada* back through the walls '*Ash-had ana la ilah illa allah*…I testify there is only one God.' Moftiya knew her daughter-in-law was fending her off, and not the evil spirits, but she decided not to fight back. She told herself, 'Khadija might think this day is about her, but this day also belongs to me. This was my home before Khadija came into it, and these boys are my grandchildren!'

After washing her sons, Khadija dressed them in white long garments, *thobs,* and combed their hair. She looked at them with adoring eyes. 'Karim,' she spoke softly. 'You are the oldest. You must be a good role model for your brothers Rahim and Muti. Everyone we know is coming to celebrate with us and congratulate you. Be polite and be welcoming to our guests'

At seven years of age, Karim had never seen his home become the centre of such a lavish celebration. Even during *Eid*, visitors would only come for short periods, dropping in and out quickly after having a sip of coffee and a bite of something sweet. But this was different. Karim and his brothers were too swept up in the excitement of it all, and too distracted by the sweet aroma of the sweet *ghoraybeh* shortbread that Khadija and Moftiya baked, that they never asked what the purpose of the celebration was, or why they seemed to be at the centre of it.

Dozens of lanterns were lit up in the garden as countless guests started to arrive. Some carried sweets, others brought musical instruments ranging from an oud, a couple of flutes, tambourines and tablas.

The women's singing and laughter outside in the garden permeated the snorting and guffawing of the Sheik's companions as trays of sweets and juice were extended to the guests. 'You will have to start with Karim.' The Sheik told his neighbour Ibrahim-Hamada confidentially. 'If you start with his younger brothers, Karim will bolt, and there will be no one in this neighbourhood fast enough to catch him.'

The Sheik noticed that Khadija's stepfather, Abraham, and his companions from the refugee camp, Hafez and Jamal, sat quietly, as though crushed by the weight of the world. 'Is everything alright brother?' the Sheik inquired of Abraham.

'The sons of bitches…' Abraham's voice trembled as he attempted to control his anger. 'They prevent us from going home and then claim we are absentees and take all of our properties.'

'Absentees!' Jamal grunted. 'Just one more label to add to our collection. It's not enough they made us refugees, stateless, internally displaced and exiled. Now we can also be called absentees.'

'What happened?' The Sheik had been distracted by preparation for his sons' party and had missed the news that day.

‘The Israeli Knesset passed a law today, called the Absentee Property Law.’ Abraham explained. ‘The law will allow …’

Jamal interrupted, ‘It will allow the Zionist thugs who took our homes in Palestine to claim everything as their own.’

‘Apparently,’ Hafez added, ‘according to this law, they, the people who took our homes at gunpoint, are *custodians* of our property.’

‘We can’t wait for the world to fix this,’ Abraham sighed. ‘We are tired of living in the refugee camps. We want to go home.’

The Sheik listened to Abraham and his companions, and he thought of Aziza. How she loved her home in Salamah. He missed the feisty woman who shared with him his love for Khadija. ‘What will you do?’ he asked.

Without a minute of hesitation, they responded in one voice. ‘Return or die.’

The Sheik’s eyes were filled with tears. ‘I will support you,’ he said. ‘If you need a place to hold meetings, hide weapons or organize, consider everything I have is yours. I’m with you all the way!’

‘I will also support you!’ Ibrahim-Hamada declared.

The Sheik’s guests all joined in, one by one declaring their support. ’We are all with you!’

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Outside in the garden, Suhailah sat patiently as Salma drew intricate henna patterns on her hands. Salma lived on Mohatta street not far from the Gaza railway station. She was in her early teens and had refused a few marriage proposals, insisting she was waiting for ‘the prince of her dreams to arrive.’ Her love for fashion trends and

the latest beauty products made her Tuffah's most called upon hairdresser, beautician and henna artist. She was always travelling in the same social circles as Fatima, and despite the age difference, with Fatima being ten years older than Salma, the two women became very close friends.

'Your hands are so pretty, everyone will think you are a bride tonight,' Salma told Suhailah as she helped her get up on her feet. Suhailah hid a shy smile and walked slowly toward her mother, her arms stretched forward to avoid staining her fancy white dress with the wet henna paste. When she found a spot next to her mother, she slowly sat down. Fatima, always the life of any party, was drumming on the tabla and singing, 'I lost my handkerchief…Sir, would you help me find my handkerchief.' Fatima's charismatic personality, her sense of humour and love for life placed her at the centre of every gathering.

Karim was competing with other boys over who could climb the highest on the sycamore tree when he saw the sweet trays finally being offered to the guests. He came down running and sat next to Suhailah. 'It's your lucky night,' Khadija teased him. 'you get to sit next to the most beautiful girl in this party.' The women laughed, and Fatima sang, 'With henna from Mecca I'll draw on your hand, your beauty is more radiant than the full moon…' Moftiya and Khadija exchanged tender smiles. The one thing they could agree on was their love for the boys.

Karim grabbed a piece of *ghoraybeh* shortbread and devoured it with extreme delight. He looked over at Suhailah, to see if she too was enjoying the sweets, but she was sulking. Her eyes were fixed on the *ghoraybeh*, but her hands were still covered in wet Henna paste, unusable. Tenderly, Karim grabbed a piece of *ghoraybeh* and placed it into her mouth. The women giggled, and Fatima sang even louder. Things were going so blissfully well.

'*Yallah* Karim. It's time.' Khadija took her son's hand and walked with him to where the men were gathered. 'You are big and strong. Show them you are a man!' She let go of his hand and he walked forward, turning back a few times to look at his mother who stood by the door smiling at him.

Inside the Sheik's room, Karim was ambushed. Ibrahim-Hamada whisked him up and pinned him down to a chair, right opposite the neighbourhood barber. Two men grabbed his legs, one on each side, and parted them. The barber quickly lifted Karim's *thob* and reached out for his private part. Karim was petrified and unable to understand how all these respectable men could be so rude and crass. This behaviour went against everything he had been taught about honour and shame, but there was no time to process it. The barber swiftly slit through his private part with a sharp knife. The men cheered, and the embarrassed young boy cried out from the sharpness of the pain. It all took less than a minute. Karim was circumcised.

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The boys were kept at home for a few weeks to recover from the circumcision, but Karim felt as though he was imprisoned with his brothers for an eternity. When the Sheik finally announced it was time for them to take a dip into the salty waters of the Mediterranean to ensure they were totally healed, Karim, Rahim and Muti were ecstatic.

They joined the large group of Tuffah women and children who were also going for a swim. Fatima was always the instigator of such fun outings. She organized who got invited, who brought the food pots, who cooked the stews, who baked the bread, who brought the watermelons, and all the other fine details needed to ensure a beautiful day on the white sandy Gazan beach.

The women's laughter and the children's screams were drowned out by the occasional singing that reverberated from their caravan of donkey carts heading to the coast. Along the way, the women turned their headscarves into canopies to shelter their children from the burning sun above as they sang:

'Why is the sea laughing
As I walk seductively
to fill my water jugs'

It only took a few minutes to unload the carts and organize the blankets and picnic pots on the beach before everyone ran into the water. Women and children, young and old, bounced off the burning hot sand straight into the sea. Karim, Rahim and Muti were allowed in the water up to Karim's waist and Muti's shoulders. Moftiya and Khadija stood in the shallow end watching over them.

'*Yumma*! Come!' Karim called out to his mother. 'We'll look after you.'

Khadija was melting from the heat she didn't need much convincing. She handed baby Latif to Moftiya, lifted her long dress up to her knees and waded in, exhilarated by the waves that crushed against her large body; she laughed so loud Moftiya wondered if the Sheik could hear her in Tuffah. The water was up to her hips when she reached her boys. She came down on her knees, her head scarf forming a perfect white circle around her, and her dress inflated like a balloon. Her boys chuckled and in the excitement of the moment, they forgot their boundaries, and took to splashing her so hard, she was terrified of losing her balance. Khadija screamed and cursed them. Moftiya looked on with disapproval. She didn't think Khadija should behave like a child. Moftiya never ventured into the water. She didn't trust the waves and was petrified of the deep.

In the late afternoon, the boys played a game of skipping waves, while the girls built sand castles, or decorated one another's hair with crowns made of seaweed. Karim's hunger pangs led him away from the games in search of food. He spotted his mother sitting on the picnic rug with the other women who were preparing the food. When he got close, he overheard a conversation that would keep him up all night.

'What do you mean Khadija isn't coming to the wedding?' Fatima sounded surprised.

'She has nothing to wear,' Moftiya explained in a matter of fact tone. 'Her evening dress is too worn out.'

'It's ok,' Khadija said. 'I'm not like you, Fatima. I don't sing or dance or even know how to put colours on my face! Weddings and parties are wasted on me. I don't mind really. You two go without me.'

Karim felt a sharp pain in his heart for his mother. That night he thought hard until he came up with an idea that would enable her to go to the neighbour's wedding. It wasn't purely an act of selfless love. Children generally were not allowed to go to weddings without their mothers, and Karim knew well that weddings always had great food and scrumptious deserts. He simply wasn't going to miss out and neither was his mother.

The next morning, Karim went over to Fatima's house and asked her if she could lend his mother one of her many beautiful dresses. Fatima had a dazzling collection, but none of her dresses fitted Khadija's large body. She didn't want Karim to leave empty handed, so she offered to lend him a fancy evening cape for Khadija to wear over whatever dress he might be able to find for her.

Karim spent the rest of that day going door to door, borrowing from all the neighbours. He managed to find a dress, a matching handbag, a pair of shoes, some lipstick, fake jewelry and he even convinced Salma, Tuffah's beauty consultant, to come over to help his mother get ready.

By the end of the day, he was so proud of himself for putting together a complete outfit for his mother. There was no longer any excuse why she couldn't attend the wedding.

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Khadija cleaned the floor of the Sheik's classroom. She collected every paper scrap left behind by the students, including newspapers they used to wrap their sandwiches while repeating the Quranic verse, '*Salamon Qawlon min Rabin Rahim*… the word of peace from the lord of mercy.' She kissed the pieces of paper, placed them in a pile and then burnt them into ashes. It was a peculiar ritual she performed almost every day. When Karim once asked her why she did this, she told him, 'Your father once told me God created this universe with one word made up of only two letters: Be. Can you imagine the power of all these letters combined and all of these written words?'

Karim waited for Khadija to finish cleaning and then said '*Yumma*! Let's get ready. I brought you everything you need to wear to the wedding tonight. Salma will be here soon to do your hair and make-up.'

Khadija was deeply moved by her son's initiative and how hard he had tried to get her to go to the neighbour's wedding party. Although she didn't like borrowing clothes from the neighbours, she didn't want to let him down.

A couple of hours later, with Salma's help, Khadija's hair was gathered in a stylish bun on top of her head and her plain face was concealed behind a thick layer of make-up. Excited by her transformation, Khadija wore Fatima's cape over her borrowed knee-long sequined dress. Leaning on Karim's shoulder, and with eyes fixed on the ground beneath her feet, she carefully balanced herself on her neighbour Om Zaki's high heels. She kept looking at herself in the mirror with a smile and a look of disbelief. Karim had to pull her away.

Before leaving, the Sheik, instructed Khadija to keep her cape on and to cover her made-up face with the scarf until she was inside the wedding party. He didn't want any men to catch a glimpse of her new glamorous look. He then added with a mischievous wink, 'And keep your make-up on, until after the boys fall sleep. I want to take a closer look at it!'

Khadija had never walked in high heels before, so she leaned on Karim all the way. But as they approached the wedding party, she decided to let go of Karim's shoulder. She wanted to walk through the door unassisted like all the other women. She took a few steps, head lifted high, feeling confident and beautiful – but her borrowed shoes betrayed her. She came tumbling down into a puddle of muddy water in full view of all the wedding guests.

The women ran to Khadija and carried her inside. Fatima and Salma helped her wash her face and change into another dress they borrowed from the bride's family. Karim felt guilty for encouraging his mother to wear high heels and for pushing her to

come to the party. So guilty that only the taste of tender cuts of lamb on spicy rice covered with pine nuts were able to ease his tormented soul.

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Suhailah, Tuffah District, Gaza, Palestine 1951

I am old
but still climbing
along the Via Dolorosa
dragging my tired steps along your sacred earth

Abdul Karim Sabawi

(7)

CONNECTING WITH GOD: PALESTINE 1951

'**C**hrist is risen!' William shouted as he raced Raja'a to the Tuffah district, leaving a trail of dust behind him. Raja'a shouted back, 'Indeed he has... stop running…I said stop…' William did not stop, he wanted to get to Karim first and show him his smart Easter outfit.

Karim waited for his friends in the shade of the ancient Sedra, resting against its wide trunk, his mind transported into the world of *Magdalen*, a novel by Mustafa Lutfi El-Manfalouti. At eight years of age, Karim was no longer afraid of the spirit of the holy man buried beneath the famous tree. He had made a pact to co-exist with the spirit in peace.

'Karim!' 'Karim!' His friends shouted as they ran down the hill toward him, but he seemed oblivious to their calls. When they finally reached the Sedra, William kicked Karim's leg shouting, 'Well? What do you think?'

Karim looked up and smiled at the sight of his friends in their three-piece suits, hair meticulously kept on the side by a generous amount of oil, and shoes shining like a mirror. 'You look like the Egyptian movie stars Anwar Wajdy and Rushdi Abaza,' Karim told his friends, but the boys were not satisfied by the compliment. 'Of course, we do,' William said. 'But the important question is which one of us looks better?'

Karim examined his friends closely. 'A wise man said, he who feeds his friends the sweetest Easter *ka'ak* is the handsomest of them all!' The boys laughed. Karim stood up, dusted off his pants and tucked his shirt in. He didn't mind that his worn-out white shirt and black pants were not as impressive as his friends' attire. After all, this was not his celebration; this special day belonged to his Christian friends. 'Happy Easter!' he said as he shook their hands and hugged them. 'Thank you for inviting me to come to your celebrations!'

'We wanted to give your miserable students a break!' William teased. Karim had just started to give private lessons after school.

‘That’s so Christian of you,’ Karim shot back. The boys laughed and walked arm in arm toward the Zeitoun quarter in the Old City where the oldest Christian church in Gaza, the Church of Saint Prophyrius, stood.

Karim’s life could not have been more different to that of most other boys his age. At school, his advanced language skills and general knowledge were beyond his years, and his sense of humour and flair for public speaking always put him at the centre of attention, winning him favours with his teachers and fellow students alike.

After school while most boys lingered on their way home to buy treats from the local store or to compete over who can climb the highest tree, Karim raced home in order to take advantage of every drop of precious day light. In a district that still had no electricity, the Sheik’s school *Madrasat Srour AlAtfal* ran all its classes before sunset and Karim had become his father’s reliable teacher assistant, preparing lessons and marking papers. Eventually Karim was handed his own class of students to teach. He was proud of sharing the responsibility of contributing to the growing family’s income.

When his school friends William and Raja’a invited him to join their Easter celebration, Karim was reluctant to accept at first. He feared that cancelling his lessons that night would create a shortage in the family budget, but his father encouraged him to go. In fact, he went beyond encouragement; he even evoked the much-revered word *wajeb* – meaning duty. He told his son ‘Christianity is part of our Palestinian heritage and an integral part of our identity. It is your *wajeb,* son, to visit your Christian brothers and sisters on their important day of festivities.’

Karim knew that his city was home to a host of saints and martyrs from Christianity’s early years, but this would be his first time to personally witness the most celebrated Christian ceremony in Palestine, the Saturday of Fire on the eve of Easter.

‘You are going to witness a real miracle!’ an excited William told his friend Karim on the way to St. Prophyrius. ‘Every year this miracle happens on the eve of Easter. It starts when BOOM, fire comes out from the tomb of Jesus Christ at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in East Jerusalem.’

‘That’s the church where Jesus was crucified,’ Raja’a interjected.

‘Wait. What do you mean BOOM and the fire comes out?’ Karim asked. ‘Who lights the fire?’

‘It is a miracle!’ both Raja’a and William responded in one voice.

William continued excitedly with the rest of the story ‘Our Fathers…the Orthodox priests, emerge from the antechamber with the Holy Fire and they pass its light by lighting the torches of all the other priests who come from far and wide. Our holy father is on the way back from Jerusalem right now carrying the holy flame in his hands.’

Karim liked the image of Roman Orthodox priests carrying Holy Fire torches across the land and the seas and was excited at the prospect of bearing witness to the arrival of the holy flame in Gaza.

At the gate of Bab al-Roum, in the Zeitoun district, the boys joined a growing crowd from Gaza’s orthodox Christian community. Some stood with crucifixes decorated with Orthodox icons, others sang to the beat of drums and many in the crowds were dancing *debka* and waving their swords and live wood crosses in the air. Raja’a and William joined the dancing circles; Karim happily watched on as more people arrived and greeted one another with *Al Massih qam,* ‘Christ is risen’.

After the dancing, the faithful filed into church where prayers were held until the midnight arrival of the holy fire. Karim sat on the bench and watched the beautiful ancient ceremony. He reflected on his father’s words that ‘Christianity is part of our Palestinian heritage and an integral part of our identity.’ He enjoyed listening to the singing of the Arabic choir and the Arabic Christian prayers. At some point during the ceremony, he caught a glimpse of his principal Hanna Farah sitting across the aisle. The principal smiled at the young Muslim boy from Tuffah and the boy smiled back.

At midnight, the Archbishop appeared in his bejeweled crown holding the Holy Fire. He walked in a procession with altar boys and the church choir igniting the candles held by the

congregation to the joyous clamouring of church bells and the chanting of the faithful who praised the glory of Christ.

**

It was homework time. The boys sat on the rug across from the Sheik. Rahim was deeply immersed in his Arabic calligraphy assignment and Karim stared out the window. Although Rahim was only in first grade, with a strike of a pen, he could turn ordinary text into potentially stunning masterpieces; he had developed a taste for beautiful patterns, and a creative mind that was able to turn ordinary lines and dots into dramatic curves and waves that rose and fell like a cappella, a *mawall* sung from the heart.

Karim on the other hand was not at all inspired by his homework. His English notebook sat unopened in his hand while his eyes and ears strained to decipher the details of the conversation taking place outside in the garden between Fatima and Khadija. The Sheik struck the floor with his stick three times to get Karim's attention, and then he ambushed him, 'Spell cat'.

Karim was quick. 'C A T.' But he sounded out the letters mechanically. English was his least enjoyable subject, but he could not escape it as it was mandatory in grade four. To prepare, the Sheik had ordered *Morris & Morris English for Beginners* at the end of the previous school year and had spent the entire summer battling the stifling heat and arduous nonsensical spelling of words like 'picture,' 'pen' and 'cat'. By the time Karim started grade four, the Sheik had a basic understanding of the language to supervise his son's homework.

'Karrriiiim!' The Sheik spoke louder and with more emphasis. 'Stay with me! Spell Apple.'

'A B B L E'

The Sheik couldn't tell if Karim had the right letter. There is no 'p' sound in Arabic, only 'b'. The Sheik needed to find a way to distinguish the two letters. ''Which 'b'?' he

asked. ‘Is it the one with the stick pointing downward or the one with the stick pointing upward?’

‘The one … with the … stick pointing...’ Karim’s answer came in dribbles. He heard Fatima and Khadija bring up his name and Suhailah’s name a few times. The Sheik was losing patience. He reached out for his stick. Rahim elbowed his brother, ‘Hey… I think the stick is pointing at you.’

The Sheik hid his smile. His sons were growing fast and were starting to have a good sense of humour. ‘Go!’ he told Karim as he threw the stick to the side. He too could hear the negotiations taking place outside; ‘Fatima will not rest until you take Suhailah to see the doctor.’

The Sheik was right. Fatima was relentless. And whenever Suhailah needed to see the doctor, Fatima always came to the Sheik and asked if Karim could take her. Maybe she was hoping to ensure her vision would be fulfilled and that Karim and Suhailah would be bonded for life. The men in Suhailah’s family didn’t seem to care if Karim did the work they were supposed to do such as taking Suhailah to the clinic. They liked him and were happy to be spared the effort. That was how Karim grew up believing Suhailah was his responsibility, and how Suhailah grew up believing Karim was her man.

They walked together through the alleyway and into Mohatta Street. Karim’s pace was always inconsistent when he was with her. He would walk fast away from her, run back toward her, pounce around her and at times stand still and watch her walk ahead. Suhailah never felt she needed to change her pace for him. She took graceful consistent steps, savouring every moment along the way. Her feet struck the ground like the hand of a clock, always moving to the same measured rhythm. Their differences made them complete when together. Karim was always animated, she was always calm, he was bold, she was shy, he could speak all day, and she never got tired of listening. And while he was composing his poetic phrases, Suhailah was always composed.

Along the way to the clinic, Karim spoke in detail about the Easter ceremony he attended with his friends, how the church looked on the inside, the singing of the choir

and the lighting of the Sacred Fire. Suhailah listened quietly, smiling and nodding. And in that brief moment of silence, when he finally took a minute to breath, Suhailah took the opportunity to ask, 'You didn't bring me anything?'

'I did!' Karim replied smiling. 'I brought you a decorative wreath made of wheat. It would have looked beautiful on your head. Like a crown!'

'So where is it?'

'Well, it's hard to know who enjoyed it more, my grandmother Moftiya who found it and thought I brought it for her, or her chickens who feasted on it'.

Suhailah laughed and Karim wondered if she was really feeling sick. She seemed to be in good health. Could it be that she just made up an excuse, so they can go on this walk together? Later at the clinic when the doctor confirmed she was well, Karim smiled from ear to ear. He was convinced Suhailah faked her illness in order to have this time with him. His heart danced all night long!

**

Karim and Rahim elbowed their way through the crowd, squinting their eyes in order to see past the colourful bright flashing lights that adorned the walls of the Mosque of Said Hashem. Rahim was determined not to lose sight of his big brother in the sea of people who had gathered for the annual festive celebration of the birthday of prophet Mohammad's grandfather who died and was buried in Gaza and who had lent his name to the city, now known as Gaza of Said Hashem.

Rahim tugged at his brother's shirt, as the two eagerly tried to make their way to the front of the parade. They were eager to watch the horseman with the impressive big white turban, the *Khalifah*, leader of devout Sufis and mystical maker of miracles. Along the way, they squeezed through clusters of people, passing through the parade of marching boy scouts in uniforms, to watch the Sufis whirling in multi-coloured skirts and Dervishes leading people into *dhikr* circles, where men, swaying to the beat of large

drums, danced to the point of exhaustion while repeating '*Allah hay,' '*God is alive', impelling their bodies and minds into an ecstatic trance in hope of reaching Oneness with God. Some Dervishes carried large green flags, inscribed with *La Ilaha illa Allah,* there is no God but the one God, and when the boys walked beneath these flags they felt like the sky had turned green and they imagined themselves also soaring high and fluttering with the wind.

When Karim finally made it to the front of the parade, he turned behind him to make sure Rahim was there and smiled to see his little brother had kept up with his step. This was the first time Rahim was allowed to go out with his big brother into the big world. The two boys stood shoulder to shoulder in the circle that formed around the *Khalifah*. When the *Khalifah* turned in their direction, the boys gasped, and their eyes nearly popped out. Riding on the white horse, the *Khalifah,* the miracle maker, was in fact one of their father's relatives, Sheik Soluman Haneyah, a man who had seemed quite ordinary. When he visited their house, they never gave him a second glance. Yet there he was, distinguished, respectable, wearing his big turban and heading the parade on his noble white horse.

Elated by the discovery, the boys joined the parade of Dervishes who marched, danced, whirled and tranced behind the *Khalifah*. Miracles were all around! One dervish ran a sword through his face, in through one cheek and out through the other. Another walked smiling on a bed of coals. A few juggled fire torches, or swallowed flames. It was a night of enchantment and mystery.

When, a week later, Sheik Soluman Haneyah, the *Khalifah,* came for a visit, Karim and Rahim treated him like a star and showered him with attention. The Sufi Sheik had a sense of humour and loved playing with children. He asked Karim and Rahim to bring him all the children that were nearby, and he ordered them to form a circle. Standing in the middle he declared them all officially inducted into his Sufi path. 'You are from this day on, my Dervishes,' he told them. 'I will take the oath with you and together we will form a prayer circle, a *halaqat dhikr.*'

From that day on, whenever the *Khalifah* visited, he would call out 'My Dervishes!' and the boys would run from every direction and quickly form a circle around him chanting '*Allah Hay*! God is alive.' The children would mimic whatever their *Khalifah* said or did. Giggling, they would rotate their bodies, swing their heads and chant.

Karim enjoyed playing these games, but he was more fascinated by the Dervish poems, songs, and the rhythm of their chants. The more Karim read and inquired the more he wanted to learn. One night, he overheard their neighbor, Ibrahim-Hamada, talk with his father about the Sufi path he followed, 'It is founded by the Algerian leader Ahmad al-Alawi,' he told the Sheik, 'The man was instrumental in the resistance against the French. Every week we gather in a prayer circle, *halaqat dhikr,* and we see the miracles of God.'

The Sheik noticed Karim standing nearby listening. He called him over and asked him if he'd like to go the *halaqat dhikr* with Ibrahim-Hamada. 'You'll be on the path of Alawi, the man who founded the modern Sufi order, *Darqawiyya Alawiyya* which combines in his teachings both spirituality and resistance.' The Sheik encouraged Karim to go and to learn more songs and poetry. Of course, both Karim and the Sheik knew that there was an underlying motivation for Karim to join the Sufi order; the *halaqat dhikr* always included a feast of *lahmah we maftool,* couscous with lamb. *Allah hay!* God is alive!

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The tangy taste of green almonds dipped in salt and crunched in the mouth marked the ending of the school year and the beginning of another summer. Students bid their teachers goodbye and raced away from their schools as fast as their legs could carry them, relieved they no longer needed to worry about doing homework or bearing the pain of their teachers' sticks when they didn't do it. The Sheik's usual guests gathered in the evening, sipping on coffee, while Qassim, their neighbour, delivered a moving rendition of a song by the Egyptian singer, Mohamad Abdel Wahab. When he finished, he was showered with praise. Ibrahim-Hamada commented, 'I can listen to Abdel Wahab's songs all day!'

‘What about you Sheik?’ Abu Sa’ada asked. ‘Who do you like listening to?’

As the Sheik did not own a radio, with much prompting from Fatima, Abu Awny allowed the Sheik to run a cable across their shared garden connecting his radio to a speaker at the Sheik’s house. From then on, whenever Abu-Awny was listening to his radio, the Sheik was also listening. The official reason the Sheik needed to listen to the radio was of course the news reports. But the Sheik also loved listening to the popular songs of the day. He didn’t like the idea of a male singer. Men, in his opinion, should not be sensitive and sing of their love and yearnings. For this reason, he preferred to listen to women singing and was mostly moved by the songs of Umm Kulthum, Asmahan and Samira Tewfik.

Abu Sa’ada repeated the question, ‘Sheik, who do you like to listen to?’ The Sheik thought carefully. He was a respected Sheik, a teacher, a man of religion, he had to craft a delicate response. But before he opened his mouth, Karim had spilled the beans. ‘My father likes women,’ Karim declared. ‘He only likes listening to the voices of women.’

The men tried hard to mask their smiles and their amusement, and the Sheik tried to mask his embarrassment. Eager to change the topic, he asked Mohamad Khodry, a successful Gaza merchant who sometimes joined these nightly gatherings, if he could give Karim some work during the summer. Much to the Sheik and Karim’s pleasure, the answer was yes.

**

The Sheik opened his mouth playfully and stretched his head forward. ’Feed me … I’m hungry,’ he begged. Latif took a bite out of the ripe apricot and stuffed the rest of it into his father’s mouth. The Sheik grabbed the toddler and tickled his belly, his giggles bringing smiles to everyone’s faces as they cleared the floor in the room, in preparation for bedtime.

Muti and Rahim pushed aside the large cooking pot while Karim and Khadija took out the washing tub and the gas stove. Once the floor was cleared, each rolled out their own

mattress and arranged their sheets and pillows. The family maintained the same sleeping order every night. The Sheik's mattress was always next to the wall under the window, Khadija's mattress next to the Sheik's and the boys' mattresses were arranged from youngest to oldest next to Khadija. With the birth of each new baby, Karim's mattress was pushed further toward the wall.

'*Yumma*,' Karim warned his mother. 'This baby in your belly right now had better be the last one. If I get any closer to the wall I will suffocate.' Khadija didn't pay Karim any attention, but the Sheik was concerned. Karim spoke out of order with his mother and earlier he embarrassed him in front of his friends. He didn't want his oldest son to be so wasteful with words.

When the boys were all under the sheets and ready for their nightly bedtime story, the Sheik knew which one he was going to tell. 'In the name of God, the merciful the compassionate!' he began. '*Kan ya makan fee qadeem alzaman*, a powerful King ruled over a vast kingdom. One night, the King dreamed he lost all his teeth. In the morning he called his most trusted advisors to interpret the dream. The first advisor told him, 'You will lose something precious your majesty.' The second advisor said, 'You will face disgrace your majesty.' And the third advisor said, 'You will lose your loved ones your majesty.' The King didn't like any of these interpretations, so he ordered the advisors be banished forever from his kingdom. A wise man heard of the King's dream and offered to stand before him. The King agreed. The wise man told the King, 'Your majesty, your dream means that you will have a very long life, longer than the lives of everyone you know.' The king was very happy with this interpretation. He rewarded the wise man with lots of gold and appointed him as his top advisor.'

The Sheik paused for a moment to signal the end of the story before he went on to reveal its moral, 'Sons, your words can determine your successes or failures in life. They are key to your fortune. Use your words wisely.'

Karim knew the story was directed at him. He had noticed his father's glare of disapproval earlier on. *'Hader Yubba,' h*e promised. 'I will!'

**

Karim enjoyed his first summer job away from his parents' endless list of chores and his brothers screams and tantrums. His boss, the merchant Mohamad Khodry, put him in charge of overseeing his inventory during its transportation from Gaza's railway station to his store near the Kaysareeyah, Gaza's old market bazaar. Every morning, Karim would walk to the train station and wait for the train to arrive from Cairo. He would then watch as large sacks of flour, sugar and coffee, destined for his boss's store, were unloaded off the train and onto a flatbed truck. Once the truck was full, Karim would climb over the sacks and lie down on his back on top of the pile. This was to ensure that no one would cut open any of the sacks along the way and steal any of the goods. Karim was warned never to sit up along the way, or he might get entangled into the low-lying electrical wires – a fatal mistake others had made in the past.

The drive from the station to the Kaysareeyah took only 15 minutes, but Karim wished it would last longer. He loved sleeping on top of the sacks and relished the sensation of the wind that brushed against his skin when the truck moved faster. He enjoyed inhaling the scents of coffee, flour and sugar, and loved losing himself to the vivid and numerous daydreams that filled the space between his eyes and the deep blue sky above.

Karim's brothers looked up to him with admiration for he had become the primary breadwinner of the family! Every night that summer, he would come home smelling like a delicious sweet blend of roasted coffee. He greeted his family with a deliberate deep voice; 'Salam alyakoum!' When he kissed his father's hand every night, he placed in his palm his day's working wage. The Sheik took only what was needed to keep the house running and the boys dressed and fed insisting that his son keep the rest for himself. Karim was left with just enough to buy a cold drink or a snack during the long working days. When he wasn't working, Karim was either reading books from his father's inexhaustible library or learning Sufi poems and songs at the *halaqat dhikr*. The Sheik watched over him with gleaming eyes and an immense sense of pride. 'We are so fortunate [blessed],' he told his wife one morning after Karim left for work. 'Praise be to God!'.

Khadija gave birth to her fifth healthy baby boy at the end of the summer of 1951. The Sheik named the baby Abdul Razak, worshipper of the God of Fortune!

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Karim, Tuffah District, Gaza, Palestine 1954

I search

for you

I ask the passers by

the merchants

the tourists

the soil

I waste seasons searching for you

I lose the wheat

the olives

and oranges

I lose the winter

And the summer too

Abdul Karim Sabawi

(8)

EGYPT BUILDS ITS GLORY: PALESTINE 1952

The following summer, Karim returned to Mohamad Khodry for work. The merchant, pleased with the boy's exemplary manners and efficiency the previous year, hired him as the store's errand boy. The job proved to be more demanding of Karim's time, but also, far more lucrative. He was paid one Egyptian pound every week, almost more than his father earned in a week during the school season.

Karim had to be at the store from the moment Khodry unlocked its large green iron door in the morning, until late in the evening when its door was locked again. He was tasked with cleaning floors, re-stocking shelves, spraying water outside the shop to keep the dust from rising, keeping count of the money and fetching beverages for the customers and other merchants who often dropped by. The boy was a fast learner and his boss was well satisfied. He quickly memorized all the names and faces of Khodry's customers and their special requirements; he knew when and how to approach them and when it was best to let them be.

Khodry's store was right at the start of the Kaysareeyah, before the gold market, and opposite the Shojayeeah café. Standing behind the counter, Karim could see Borno the shoe mender's cart outside and across from it, he watched Khidewy Abu Abbas, the street barber standing on the sidewalk, his mouth constantly moving with songs and tales while cutting, trimming and dyeing head after head. The barber shrewdly parked his chair on the sidewalk next to the café because he believed that anyone who had time to sit at a café probably had time for a haircut.

Standing outside Khodry's store, Karim could also see the hundreds of people who went by every day. There were those who went inside the Kaysareeyah looking for gold and silver in the tiny precious jewelry boutiques. There were others who came for the luxurious textiles and fashionable accessories, some locally made, and others imported from Egypt and Syria. But most customers came to restock their pantries with aromatic spices, dried fruit, freshly roasted nuts and cardamom infused coffee. Some faces were familiar to Karim, but there were many he did not recognise. Once in a while, he found himself staring at a beautiful girl going by, or a scantily dressed woman; this was a sight the boy was not accustomed to

seeing in Tuffah. It was during such times that his boss gently reprimanded him. ‘Keep your eyes on the merchandise,’ he would often say.

One hot summer evening, in July of 1952, excitement spread like wildfire through the old market. The radio broadcasted news that officers in the Egyptian army, who called themselves the Free Officers Movement, had successfully overthrown King Farouk. The first to arrive at Khodry’s shop demanding a celebration was Ibrahim-Hamada, Karim’s Sufi teacher and next-door neighbour. Soon after, Borno the shoe-mender packed up his tools, locked his cart, and joined them. Khodry was overjoyed and sent Karim to the café to get tea for his guests, but Borno objected, ‘This occasion requires more than tea.’ ‘Of course, it does!’ Khodry laughed. ‘Karim, get us two bottles of Coka-Cola from the Café.’

Outside the café, Karim was intercepted by Abu Abbas, the street barber. ‘Boy!’ the barber called out. ‘What’s going on?’

‘A revolution in Egypt. The army took over and King Farouk was overthrown.’

‘The King of Whores had it coming,’ Khodry shouted at the barber from across the road. ‘Come and celebrate with us.’ Karim smiled when he heard his boss cursing the ousted King in public. It was very unusual for Khodry, or any merchant in the market, to engage in political discussions, especially those relating to Egypt. Since 1948, Gaza had been under Egyptian rule, and almost all of Gaza’s economy depended on Egypt.

At the café, the radio broadcast ran in a loop, ‘Breaking News: The Free Officers Movement led by General Muhammad Naguib and Lieutenant Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser have orchestrated a coup and succeeded in overthrowing King Farouk.’ Every time the announcement was repeated, the crowd at the cafe cheered with the same amount of enthusiasm as if hearing the news for the first time.

While waiting for his turn to order, Karim noticed a number of men go into a room at the back of the cafe. He followed them into the packed room. He saw Hafez, the young man from the refugee camp, who often came to visit his father the Sheik, delivering a fiery speech: ‘Comrades. Brothers. *Feda’yeen*. Four years have passed since 1948 and we are still here sleeping in a tent while others sleep in our beds. Suffering the cold while others are warm under

our roofs. Eating rations from the UN while foreigners are harvesting our fruits. We are on Palestinian soil but there is no Palestine. We are refugees on our land. And we are made absent from our properties against our will. Denied the right to return to our homes. Denied the right to citizenship. Denied the right to freedom.'

The crowd cheered after every sentence. Karim was blown away. He leaned his back on the wall and let the words penetrate into his depth. Hafez continued: 'Israel built a state on the ruins of our nation. The good Egyptian officers who came to fight with us were betrayed by their rulers. The son of a dog King Farouk gave them weapons that backfired. Well, he had only one priority, his English masters. He served them at the expense of his Egyptian subjects. At the expense of Palestinians and at the expense of all the Arab people. And when they gave Israel a victory, Egypt declared Gaza as its Protectorate. We formed the All-Palestine Government in Gaza, and you know what? It wasn't only Israel that exiled us. It was also Egypt. The Egyptian government ordered the relocation of our government to Cairo turning it into a government in exile and forbidding it from returning to Gaza. But today all of this has changed. Today the Egyptian freedom fighters have risen. Today Egypt is reborn. Today we can look forward to building a new resistance. To working together….'

'Karim, you shouldn't be here,' Salem whispered as he pulled Karim out of the room. Karim wasn't surprised to see Salem there. He had heard rumours that his neighbour had joined the Fedayeen. Although the two boys grew up together, they were not close friends. Salem was a few years older, and Karim also viewed him as an extension of the Sheik's stick as he was the one who would bring Karim to the Sheik whenever he did something wrong.

'What's the matter with you?' Karim was frustrated.

'Your father would want me to keep you away from here. You're too young for this. Now get back to your work!'

Karim was annoyed with Salem's interference and his condescending tone, but he had no choice. He picked up the beverages and ran back to Khodry's store.

When he gave Borno, the shoe mender, the Coka-Cola bottle, the man's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. 'How strange,' he said staring through the glass. 'How did they

manage to squeeze this large piece of frozen ice into the bottle?' This was the first time that the café had used its new freezer, an electric device unknown to many from the Tuffah district.

The men looked more closely at the bottle, bewildered by the large piece of ice and the narrow bottle neck. Borno declared that the café owner had cheated him and that he would only pay half price for the drink. He refused to pay for the ice, prompting Abu Abbas the barber to say, 'Beside your gift for mending shoes and dying leather, you certainly have a God given gift for finding creative ways to get discounts.'

Khodry and Ibrahim-Hamada laughed in agreement. 'Once when Borno travelled with me to Cairo,' said Khodry, 'he haggled the clerk at the hotel so hard that at the end of our stay, the clerk reached into his own pocket and gave him *baghsheesh*…just to get rid of him.'

The mystery of the frozen ice in the Coka-Cola bottle and Borno's haggling dominated the remainder of the evening, taking all the attention away from Egypt and its revolution. Karim was growing bored with the men's banter and was eager to go home and discuss with his father the revolution in Egypt and the brewing Palestinian resistance. He wanted an intellectual analysis not the shallow interpretation of merchants at the bazaar.

At the end of the evening, Karim walked with Ibrahim-Hamada to the Shojayeeah station, where the two could take the train to Gaza station near their home in Tuffah. They walked along Omar al-Moktar street, and perused the shop windows, the lively cafes and the beautiful fancy automobiles.

'Look!' Ibrahim-Hamada pointed to the shop window of the only photography studio in Gaza. The studio belonged to an Armenian who was known for his quick changes of portraits in his window to respond to the political trends of the day. Since 1949, he had displayed a large portrait of King Farouk in his shop window. That night, the King was gone, and in his place hung a beautifully framed portrait of General Muhammad Naguib, the leader of the Free Officers Movement. Ibrahim-Hamada smiled, 'This man gets his news faster than an Indian barber.'

They stared at the portrait of the young Egyptian officer in the army uniform. It seemed as though all the radios in Gaza were tuned into the same station, broadcasting a song by

Egypt's most enchanting voice, Umm Kulthum. She sang 'Egypt speaks for itself…the people stand up to see…how we build our glory…'

**

Karim, Gaza Beach, Palestine 1959

Your sky is blue
Your sea is blue
Your eyes...
Radiant like a holy feast
You are inconceivable happiness
Your palms hold eternal bliss
Fragrant bouquets of roses and lilies
Your face is peaceful
Like a new dawn
Glorious and elegant
I am astonished by those not in love with you
They know not how to love and adore

Abdul Karim Sabawi

(9)

SWEET LOVE: PALESTINE 1954 -1956

Some mark the years by the rise and fall of political powers, revolutions, collective victories and shared losses. Some mark the years by the state-of-the-art innovations and fashion trends. But there are those who believe that it is in the hidden folds of the spectacular and in the margins of the historic, inside that unremarkable space often reserved for the usual and the mundane, it is there that the most precious memories are kept. Suhailah was such a person.

She paid attention to the details of daily life. She kept her drawers organized and her appearance impeccable. She accepted the way things were without questioning. She accepted her father's and brothers' lack of interest in her life. If they seemed passive and emotionally out of reach, she blamed it on their long hours working at the family's scrap metal store. She admired her mother's strength, trusted her commands and obeyed them. And she was grateful that Karim offered her a window into the big world.

Karim was kind and gentle. He took time to ask about her school, help her with her homework and whenever she was ill, he was the one to take her to see the doctor and to follow up to ensure she had medicine and proper care. Once during the holy month of Ramadan, while everyone was fasting, Karim caught her standing under the almond tree, discretely eating an almond. She was so embarrassed. Girls and women were only allowed to break their fasting when they had their period. But Karim made her feel at ease. And although he was fasting, he picked almonds off the tree for her, crushed their hard-shells and watched her eat. He was smiling through his hunger pains at the thought that the girl next door with the blond curls had grown up into womanhood.

Suhailah only read the books that he brought for her, no one else bothered to give her books to read. The two shared a love for Egyptian cinema and Abdel Halim Hafez songs. Sometimes Karim told Suhailah stories about his school life or about the students he tutored in his father's home school. Sometimes Suhailah would share with Karim stories about her family and her fights with her brothers. And when she was hit with a terrible pain in her abdomen, Fatima only trusted Karim to take her to the hospital.

The doctor diagnosed her with a nasty case of worms and she was admitted into the Al-Shifa hospital's children ward. For an entire week, the 11-year-old girl had no visitors at all, except for one. Her mother had her hands full at home and was heavy carrying her sixth child in her belly. Her father, Abu-Awny, worked long hours at his scrap metal store and her brothers never came. If it weren't for Karim, Suhailah would have cried alone, all seven days and nights.

On the first two days, the 12-year-old Karim, sat beside her bed and read her stories from the Persian fables of *Kalila and Dimna*. On the third day, he laid out for her, scene by scene, the details of a film he saw at the cinema called *Maw'ed Gharam*, Appointment with Love, starring Faten Hamama, Abdel Halim Hafez and Rushdy Abaza.

On the fourth day she had permission to leave the ward, so he walked with her outside the children's ward, and the two sat on a rock overlooking the sea. He didn't seem himself that day. He was cloaked in sadness. 'What's new?' She asked. He smiled. 'The Armenian photographer has taken down the portrait of General Muhammad Naguib, and put up a poster of Egypt's new president, Gamal Abdel Nasser.'

Suhailah knew he was avoiding her question. 'That's old news,' she said. 'Karim, why are you upset?'

Karim couldn't tell her that despite his best efforts, the money his family made was not enough to pay for the school fees that year, and that both he and his brother Rahim were served with a suspension notice and told they were not allowed to go to school until they'd settled their accounts. 'Don't worry about me,' he said. 'It's not a big deal. Just a little problem that I will take care of.'

On the fifth day, Karim and Suhailah sat again on the rock. He was energized, animated, smiling from ear to ear. He opened up and told her what the problem was the previous day, and then looked at her sheepishly and said, 'But today, I fought the system with the only weapon I have and I won!'

There was a dramatic pause, Suhailah urged him to continue. 'I burst into the principal's office and I fired a poem at him.' Suhailah giggled. 'A poem! That's your weapon?'

‘Well it worked like magic,’ Karim boasted, ‘You want to hear it?’ ‘Yes!’ she said, smiling. Karim stood up on the rock, and began to recite:

‘They kicked me out and slammed the door
Be gone they said, you are poor
Without the fees do not return
You can’t afford the price to learn
It all comes down to a simple fee
Education is a commodity
I dragged my feet toward a home
A dark cave where even mice don’t roam
My father shouted: tell them son
The era of inequality is gone
This is the age of Nasserism
Not exclusivity and elitism
Dear Principal, I’m not asking for charity
I stand before you and my brother waits
For your decision, outside the gates
Let us return to our classroom
And let education light up our home’

Suhailah stood up and clapped enthusiastically. ‘Bravo! Bravo!’

‘When I finished the poem, the principal said enough, son, go to your class. I said what about my brother, he said tell your brother he can go to his class too.’

‘Did you read this to your father?’ Suhailah was curious. She knew the Sheik was apprehensive about Karim writing poetry.

‘Only afterwards, when it got me back into school.’ Karim’s father was wary of him writing poetry. ‘The Sheik worries that if I become a poet, I would end up a mouthpiece for rulers and factions. I promised him that would never happen.’

‘What does that mean?’ Suhailah asked.

‘My father believes that professional poets who depend on their poems to live, inevitably end up selling their souls,’ Karim explained.

On the last day, Karim brought Suhailah a basket of guava fruit and change of clothes that Fatima gave him in the morning. The two walked home together, taking slow steps and choosing the longest roads possible to get back to Tuffah. They had so much to say to one another, but they never spoke of love. Why would they? It would have been like saying that the sun is bright, and the sky is blue.

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Karim's love for books doubled when he realised they gave him the perfect cover to visit Suhailah every day. It was an acceptable constructive intellectual exercise. He was educating her on the works of Arab poets and novelists, and whenever possible, sharing with her his own poems and creative endeavours. But as the two young love birds grew older, the nature of the material Karim brought to Suhailah began to include more romantic and adult-like themes; most controversial was the romantic novel *al-wisadah alkhalyah,* 'Vacant Pillow', by Egyptian author Ihsan Abdelquddous. Suhailah devoured the words of the novel and imagined herself as Sameeha, the beautiful young woman who wins Salah's heart. Salah's character was of course replaced by Karim in Suhailah's fertile imagination. Suhailah's heart nearly stopped when the two kissed and she wept uncontrollably when Sameeha's parents objected to Salah's marriage proposal forcing Sameeha to marry another man. How could the power of first love not win in the end?

Her brother Azmy stood in the doorway, his anger rising at the thought of his innocent young sister reading such a mature story with clear sexual undertones that were too liberal for their conservative world in Tuffah. He snatched the book out of her hand, yelling, 'How dare you read these dirty books?' He stormed outside, holding the book in his hand like some damning evidence from a crime scene. '*Yumma,*' he called out to their mother, 'Your daughter is reading dirty books.'

Fatima was outside in the garden hanging the laundry when Azmy and Suhailah came running toward her. She paused and stared at Azmy, challenging him, 'Read to me the dirty part, let me judge for myself.' Azmy obviously had read the book himself many times, he knew exactly where to find the steamiest passage. 'Look! Right here!' he pointed his finger on the page. Fatima leaned over and read out loud, 'They threw themselves into one another's

passionate embrace …' she smiled as she read the dots out loud 'dot dot dot dot? Really? Azmy?'

'These dots are not innocent,' Azmy insisted. Fatima knew the dots were like blank spaces that the reader was invited to fill in with their imagination. What happens after two people lose themselves into one another's passionate embrace is 'dot dot dot dot.' Fatima also knew that it was Karim who supplied Suhailah with these books – a situation she wholeheartedly approved of and had no intention of jeopardizing.

'This is adult content,' Azmy insisted. 'It will open-up her eyes.'

Fatima shrugged, 'So what?' She picked up another shirt from the basket, and clipped it on the clothes line, 'Let her learn about the world. She is not a little girl anymore'.

A few days later, on Suhailah's 13th birthday, Karim gave her the most special book of all. 'This is our story!' he said as he nervously watched her flick through the dozens of neatly handwritten pages. 'I wrote all of our memories, since we were very little. Everything we did together. How you were dressed like a bride on the night of my circumcision, how we slept next to each other in Khan Yunis during the bombing …our meetings under the pomegranate tree…' Suhailah flicked through the pages of the book, her heart pounding causing her hands to tremor. 'What happens in the end of this story?' she shyly whispered. Karim's answer was fast: 'We get married and grow old together.'

And that was how Karim proposed. The sparks in Suhailah's eyes and the allure in her smile was how she accepted. Nothing more needed to be said. They sat together in that familiar silence which conveyed a thousand words that were too precious to utter. But the sweet stillness of that night ended with the fury of Israeli warplanes roaring in the skies above. Karim and Suhailah quickly ran back to their homes.

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In the morning, the men gathered at the Sheik's home, eager to find out what was going on and how they could plan to protect their families and livelihoods from yet another war. Abu-Awny's radio blasted the BBC Arabic news report through the speaker in the Sheik's room.

Rahim was on duty pouring coffee for the guests, while Karim, now old enough to participate in such important discussions, sat next to his father.

The Sheik turned off the radio. 'They want to make sure that the Arabs never rise above their colonial interests,' he said. 'Since President Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, France and Britain have plotted with Israel to bring him down.'

'President Nasser had no choice.' Karim was eager to show off his knowledge. He wanted to impress Suhailah's father, Abu-Awny, who sat quietly sipping on his coffee. 'The US broke its promise to fund the construction of the Aswan Dam. Nationalizing the Suez Canal is the only way to cover these funding shortages. Also, what really antagonized France is Nasser's endorsement and support for the Algerian heroic resistance against French Imperialism.'

Ibrahim-Hamada understood what the young Karim's motives were. '*Mashallah*!' he theatrically exclaimed to the Sheik, 'May God protect your son from the evils of envy. He is very knowledgeable!' To ensure Abu-Awny was paying attention, Ibrahim-Hamada prodded him, 'Abu-Awny, don't you agree Karim is one of our smartest young men?' Abu-Awny glanced quickly at Karim and back at his coffee cup; he was clearly unimpressed.

'At least we know this time, we have strong powers on our side,' Abu Sa'adah said. 'It's not like in 1948 when the Arab armies stood alone. This time, the Soviet Union supports the Egyptian demands. You'll see! Israel and its Chief of Staff, Moshe Dayan, the one-eyed dog, will suffer a great defeat.'

'Let's hope this ends soon,' Abu-Awny finally spoke. 'We are all living hand to mouth. We can't afford to have our businesses and schools shut for too long.'

The economic impact of another war was a terrifying thought for people living on the edge of poverty. The men looked at one another, exchanging faint smiles, each wondering how to save enough rations to keep their families from starvation.

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Through the windows of his office at the Gaza Municipal Building, Monir ElRayes watched the approaching Israeli tanks. The much-loved Mayor of Gaza had been expecting the arrival of those unwelcomed visitors from the moment he was notified of the withdrawal of the Egyptian administrative staff. ElRayes was an astute educated man, brave, like the people of his city, and just as stubborn. But there was nothing he could do. With the Egyptians abandoning their positions, Gaza had become an open city with no authority to protect its people.

The young Israeli soldiers stormed into his office, rifles pointed at him, and eyes scanning the room. Their most senior officer read out loud, in broken Arabic, a letter outlining a list of orders and demands. The Mayor listened with a cold smile. They expected him to recognise Israel's authority and demanded that he inform the Palestinians in his city that they must cooperate with the Israeli occupation. They assured him he would be able to continue to act as Mayor under their rule. They assured him they would be happy to work with him. They did not know him at all. 'I do not now, nor will I ever recognise your authority,' ElRayes told the boys with the guns, in his calm and deliberate voice. 'And I will never serve under your illegitimate presence in our homeland.'

The soldiers placed him under arrest. Handcuffed, he was dragged out of the building and thrown into a military jeep. His deputy mayor was not as brave. He signed the Gaza surrender agreement. News of the Mayor's arrest and of Gaza's surrender spread fast in the city. A curfew was enforced and families stayed in their homes in silence and in fear. Refugees who had escaped Israel's ruthless massacres and war of 1948 relived the trauma of their flight and dispossession as the Israeli tanks rode for the first time in the streets of the old city and toward their refugee camps. It wasn't long before news spread of a ruthless massacre in Khan Younis where Israeli soldiers murdered three hundred Palestinians during their takeover of that city.

Khadija ran across the garden to see Fatima. She knew her friend and neighbour would be terrified for the wellbeing of her family in Khan Yunis, but along the way, her own deep wounds were gushed open. She remembered her mother Aziza, and the village of her birth Salamah. She fell to her knees weeping for all the loss and sorrow she and others had endured and witnessed since 1948.

It wasn't long before she heard screams outside in the street, 'The Israelis are coming…they're coming…' Her heart was filled with fear and as she ran back into her home, survival became a priority. She called out the names of her sons and gathered them together in the Sheik's room. She kissed them one by one. 'You are pieces of my heart,' she said, 'Please God, protect my sons.' The Sheik and his sons hid their tears and swallowed their words. What could words do at a time like this? Moftiya rolled out her prayer mat and began praying as they waited to come face to face, for the first time, with a brutal enemy who had the power to take from them everything they loved.

The Israeli tanks rolled into the Tuffah District, and soldiers began to systematically search for fighters and weapons. They shouted their orders through megaphones calling on all men of fighting age to leave their homes and stand outside in the open. They threatened that any man found hiding in their home would be shot on the spot.

The boys were torn in that moment of terror as the soldiers raided their home. Rahim threw his arms around his grandmother Moftiya, Latif and Muti clung to their mother and Razak cried in his father's arms. Karim stood in humiliation watching the scene unfold. Tears streaming down his face.

The soldiers loaded their rifles ready to shoot the man who clearly defied their orders and stayed in his home. Khadija and Moftiya both yelled at the soldiers '*Mashlool…' ' mashlool…' 'mashlool...*' They had never uttered these words before. Not in front of the Sheik and certainly not in front of his sons. *Mashlool*, paralyzed, handicapped, disabled… the Sheik was bigger than such words. But at that moment, that is all that he was. A helpless *mashlool*. The Sheik picked up his left paralyzed arm with his right working hand and dropped it. Karim was deeply ashamed of seeing his father, the great intellect, the Sheik, put on display for the enemy soldiers his weakness, his inability to move and to defend his wife and sons. The soldiers understood the message and moved on after they searched all the rooms, turning mattresses upside down, and emptying drawers, bottles and pots on the floor.

Next door, Fatima and Abu-Awny worried the most about Azmy and Suhailah. Azmy looked older than his age and could have been mistaken for an adult fighter; Suhailah had blossomed into womanhood, and there were many stories of Israeli soldiers sexually assaulting or raping young Palestinian women. So Abu-Awny quickly dug a hole in the backyard that

looked like a grave, and told Azmy to hide in it, covering it with palm leaves and tree branches, meanwhile, Fatima made Suhailah wear a peasant dress, a *thoub*, and she wrapped her now darker chestnut curls under a scarf making her look like an older, less attractive woman. The tricks worked. The Israeli soldiers only trashed their house before moving on to the next.

After a few days, the curfew was lifted, but the schools and shops remained shut; mass fear and confusion continued to spread. Another massacre by Israeli forces took place in Rafah where more than 100 Palestinian refugees were killed. The United Nation Relief and Work Agency (UNWRA), the official authority looking after the Palestinian refugees, pulled its officials out of Gaza, leaving behind UN storages full of food rations. As soon as word got out that UNWRA officials had cleared their posts, refugees and Gaza residents alike, all ran into the UN storage warehouses and helped themselves to the rations. Karim ran with the crowd and elbowed his way through the stampede, ducking elbows and feet, until he secured a sack of flour within his grip. He held on tight to the flour and allowed the movement of the maddened crowd to spew him out into the clearing and back to the street.

Israel's 1956 occupation of Gaza lasted through the winter and into the beginning of spring the following year with schools and businesses shut through the five months of military rule. Karim and Rahim were forced to look for work to feed their family. Picking oranges and loading crates in the orchards that surrounded their district was hard labour, but it was the only work they could find.

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'*Assalum alyakoum*, peace be upon you, along with Allah's mercy and his blessings.' Khadija whispered the final words of her dawn prayer almost mechanically, turning her head to the right and then to the left, following her husband's lead. Connecting with the divine five times a day often lightened her load, but not this morning. Her mind was burdened with worries about Karim and Rahim. The two boys had been coming home every evening with blisters and soars spreading over the sunburnt skin that wrapped their skeleton-thin bodies.

Khadija prayed that God give them strength and drape them with his mercy as she rolled away the prayer mats and headed out to the garden to fetch the daily breakfast ingredients; chilies, lemons, basil and tomatoes.

Rahim woke-up to the sound of the daily pounding of the pestle crushing the chilies into the hardened pottery mortar, his stomach urging him to rise, his aching body begging him to remain under the sheets. 'Rahim,' his mother's voice cut through his mind's deliberation. 'It's time to get up. Go fetch your brother.'

The thirteen-year-old Karim had finally moved out of his parents' room. This, after he woke-up thirsty one night, and heard them making unusual sounds. With sincere curiosity he yelled across the room, '*Yumma*, *Yubba*, what are you doing?' Khadija and the Sheik held their breath for what seemed to be an eternity. The room was pitch dark and Karim couldn't see anything. He took a sip out of the water jug and went back to sleep after filing the incident into the back drawers of his mind where he kept all of the mysterious and unexplained memories. The next morning, the Sheik rewarded Karim for his curiosity. 'Karim, you are now a young man and you shouldn't be sleeping in our room anymore,' his father said. 'If you can clean up the barn, and turn it into a room, then it is yours!'

Rahim was two years younger, the second in command, and his brother's most trusted companion and advisor. Karim even relied on him to keep an eye on Suhailah, and to make sure she had everything she needed whenever he wasn't around. The two brothers were very different, not only in appearance – Rahim's fair skin and blue eyes strongly contrasted Karim's dark skin and dark brown eyes - but they were also different in personalities. Rahim was quiet, a silent do-er of things, a gentle spirit; Karim, on the other hand, filled the spaces around him with his articulate words and larger than life charisma.

After breakfast, the two brothers kissed their father's and their mother's hands and walked out of their home barefooted and in rags. Their shoes were kept safe from wear and tear so they could be worn when the school reopened, and they didn't want to damage their good shirts working in the field. The soles of their feet were hardened from the daily trek along the cold unpaved roads that were covered with sharp stones. Rahim often sang along the way to keep his mind distracted from the pain in his feet. He had a gift for music and he perfectly struck every note. Karim loved hearing him sing and whenever he stopped, Karim broke into poetry.

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‘You need to fear God!’ Suhailah heard her mother’s high pitch voice performing the nightly song of rebuke, accompanied by a background chorus of croaking frogs and chirping crickets. Fatima’s generosity and Abu-Awny’s tight grip on money were always at the center of every argument. Abu-Awny’s scrap metal boomed in times of economic hardships and the family’s food storage clay pots were always full to the rim. It was only natural for Fatima to share her food with those less fortunate, especially her neighbours, the Sheik’s family. But Abu-Awny had different ideas. On the surface, it appeared he wanted to save money, but deep down, all he really wanted, was for Fatima to obey him, even when he made unreasonable demands. He wanted this so badly, that nightly, he rained upon her head a litany of accusations and criticism which later, he always wished had never rolled off his tongue. Fatima ran everything in the house to perfection, but he could never bring himself to show appreciation.

When Abu-Awny married Fatima, he was fourteen, and she was only eleven. She moved into his family home before she had her first period. Abu-Awny was intrigued by her. She was stunning in beauty and her eyes beamed with intelligence. He asked her what she wanted as a wedding gift. She said, ‘I never had a doll. Do you know how to make one?’ That was how Abu-Awny became Fatima’s own private toy maker. Later, Fatima would tell her friends that she had asked for toys to remind him that she was a child and to keep him busy making things with his hands until she got used to him.

Two and a half years later, a dozen dolls, a couple of doll houses, a swing and a seesaw later, Fatima got her period. This marked an end to a beautiful childhood that any girl in Tuffah could only have dreamed of. Now she was expected to move into Abu-Awny’s bedroom, and for the two to become man and wife. They began slowly. Abu-Awny was gentle in his ways with Fatima and she was assertive, letting him know exactly what she felt comfortable with and saying no to anything she didn’t desire, until the marriage was finally consummated. At that time, Fatima was fourteen and Abu-Awny was seventeen years of age.

Deep down, Abu-Awny knew he was fated to lose every argument. Fatima was too strong, and he loved her too deeply – even to the point of humiliation. He was ashamed of her hold on him, ashamed of her strength that made him look weak, ashamed of his love, and so he hid it under a coarse layer of shallow resentment and bitter indifference. His love for Fatima was a secret he carefully guarded all his life.

‘Khadija is pregnant,’ Fatima told her husband in her end of argument tone. ‘She needs to eat well.’ The silence that followed was one which Suhailah eagerly waited for. Now, uninterrupted, she could drift away into her romantic world, reading Karim’s handwritten book, hanging on his every word and writing the ending of a life which, unlike her mother’s, would be a life of love, lived happily ever after.

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In March of 1957 excitement swept through the streets and alleys of Tuffah. The women ululated and sang songs of love for the homeland while the men gathered in cafes and in the streets hugging one another and praising the almighty for the enemy’s defeat. Israel, France and Britain were pressured by the United States and the UN to cease all hostilities and Israel was forced to withdraw from territories it occupied beyond the 1948 armistice line. Gaza was free from Israeli military presence and a UN peacekeeping force was to take over its administration.

The men of Tuffah gathered at the Sheik’s home to celebrate the victory. Rahim’s joy seemed to exceed that of anyone else’s. Having worked hard in the orange orchards had won him a new special status in the family. He was no longer the coffee pourer and fetcher of things; this was now his younger brother Muti’s job. Rahim ascended to the status of respected member of the Sheik’s nightly circle. He sat next to Karim and the two sipped on coffee like all the other men and occasionally joined in the conversation.

‘Israel did not want to withdraw,’ the Sheik told his guests. ‘It took the UN two months to reach a withdrawal agreement with the Anglo-French forces, and much longer to get Israel to do so.’

Karim agreed. ‘Their butcher, Prime Minister Ben Gurion, told his people that the 1948 armistice line has no validity. Israel thinks it can decide where its borders begin and end.’

‘Sometimes, it is astounding how much agreement we can have with our enemy. The armistice line…’ Hafez paused mid-sentence. He placed a cigarette in his mouth, lighting it, then sucking the tobacco deeply into his lungs before he lifted his head to exhale a cocktail of

words wrapped in smoke. ‘The armistice line is what separates us from our homes on the other side. It has no validity. That country that calls itself Israel has no validity. Nothing it holds has validity.’ The men nodded in agreement, while the Sheik’s sons Karim, Rahim and Muti, the youngest in the crowd, stared adoringly at Hafez, mesmerized by the refugee fighter’s words and his smoke and fire theatrics.

‘How much longer must we wait here before we can go back to our homes, our land, our old life?’ Abraham’s voice was laden with sorrow and memories of Salamah and a life forever disrupted. He signaled Muti to pour him more coffee, and asked, ‘How old are you?’ Muti was taken by surprise. ‘I’m ten years old.’ Abraham looked at him for a few moments. ‘You were a baby when Palestine was stolen. Their crime is as old as you are. Always remember this.’

Muti did not need a reminder. He paid close attention to what people said in the streets, in the gatherings and especially in the conversations which Karim and his friends had when they talked about Israel, the massacres and the refugees. Many nights he sat quietly in the background listening to Karim discussing his ideas of non-violent resistance; Karim was taken by the teachings of Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Muti adored his older brother, and he deeply valued his opinion, but when it came to revolutions and resistance, he was beginning to form his own. No one knew that Muti occasionally followed Hafez at night to listen to his meetings with the *Fedayeen* fighters. He was so talented at secretly spying on the fighters that he vowed that as soon as he could hold a rifle, he was going to teach them how to actually conduct a meeting in secret and he was going to help them plan for the liberation of Palestine. But for now, Muti poured coffee in the cups and sponged up every bit of information.

‘This was a good victory,’ Ahmad AlJaro, the young neighbourhood thug decided to object to the grim turn their celebration had taken. ‘Can’t we just enjoy our first and only victory?’

‘It is a defeat for Israel, Britain and France,’ the Sheik said. ‘It maybe a victory for Nasser and for Egypt, but it is not a victory for us.’

Sheik Ibrahim-Hamada shuffled his hurried steps into the Sheik’s gathering ‘Quick!’ he said panting. ‘Turn on the radio. Nasser is speaking’.

Muti ran up to Abu-Awny's house to ask him to turn on the radio, and the two sprinted back across the garden to listen to the speech with the Sheik and the other men. Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's confident and playful voice travelled through the cable to the speaker in the Sheik's room and echoed throughout the speakers and radios of the entire Arab world.

'…In the past, one word in Time Magazine was enough to remove the head of the Egyptian government. Now, they are insulting us? We can insult them too.' Abdel Nasser was taking long pauses between his words, giving his adoring crowds time for laughter. 'Our papers can insult Britain's Queen and their Prime Minister. Didn't you write something insulting on the walls here in Port Said?' The crowd roared with laughter both on the radio and in the Sheik's room. 'Should we find the wall and read it to them?' Abdel Nasser asked, and the crowd applauded their victorious leader. 'You wrote on the wall your queen is what?' Abdel Nasser asked. The crowd shouted back, 'A bitch!' There was more applause and hysteric laughter. 'We feel we are strong,' Abdel Nasser said. 'We feel the world has changed. When the BBC calls Gamal Abdel Nasser a dog, we say you are the sons of sixty dogs…in the past Time Magazine could write something and the head of the Egyptian government would fall, but today, Port Said made the head of the British government fall. The world has turned over. The world has changed!'

Inspired by Abdel Nasser's speech, Karim quietly withdrew from the crowd. He walked across the garden and inhaled the sweet smell of spring. His chest expanded wide enough to contain the entire universe. This is what hope is made of! He strolled out into the street and to the nearest street lamp. There, he sat down with his favourite book, *The American Crisis* and, together with Thomas Paine, he spent hours plotting his people's liberation. The next morning, he woke up to news of the arrival of a new baby brother. The Sheik Named his sixth born son Abdel Nasser, worshiper of the God of Victory.

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Powered by the teachings of Thomas Paine, Karim was in the frontline of every non-violent protest in Gaza that called for the return of the Egyptian administration and a rejection

of the UN international forces presence. Carried on the shoulders of the massive crowds, the young skinny dark boy from Tuffah chanted into the megaphone, 'Nasser! Nasser! None but Nasser! Egypt! Egypt! None but Egypt!' When the crowds arrived at the Gaza Municipal Building, one of the protesters climbed on the pole and brought down the UN flag replacing it with the Egyptian flag. 'Nasser! Nasser! None but Nasser!' the crowd repeated, following Karim's lead.

Karim went home, his voice hoarse from chanting. He had a confidence that the world was in his grip. He believed it was time to make his move. Suhailah was growing more beautiful with every passing day. Suitors were starting to visit her family. '*Yubba*,' he said to his father, 'I want to marry Suhailah.'

The Sheik thought for a minute, 'Son, you are in charge of your destiny.' He said, 'You are the oldest of my sons, and the one to lead this family after me. If you want Suhailah, if you ask for her hand, your words must be like bullets. Once they are uttered you cannot take them back. You cannot change your mind. If you ask for her hand, we, your brothers and I, will stand with you no matter what the consequences may be.'

Tradition dictates that a potential suitor's family would go to the home of the bride to ask for her hand in marriage. But the Sheik had reached a stage where he was no longer able to walk at all. So, instead, he invited Abu-Awny to come over for a visit. When Abu-Awny arrived, and saw the nervous well-dressed Karim sitting next to his father, he knew he had stepped into a trap. Fatima must have known this was going to happen, but she didn't warn him. She must be standing outside the room with Khadija and Moftiya, waiting to ululate and bring in the tray of celebratory juice. How could they all take him for a fool like this?

Abu-Awny sat quietly, allowing the Sheik to go through the polite formalities. He listened to the obligatory introduction, the building up, the description of Karim's good manners and promising future, and then, the grand-finale, the request for Suhailah's hand in marriage. Abu-Awny listened, his anger rising, until the Sheik was done. He looked Karim up and down. 'Grow up first,' he said, 'then I promise you, not only will I find you a wife, I will even pay for your wedding. Suhailah needs to marry someone more worthy of her.'

With these humiliating words, Abu-Awny stormed out with Fatima, who was indeed standing outside ready to celebrate, trailing behind him, and Karim free-falling from the seventh heaven into the pits of hell.

Nothing could ease Karim's anger or his pain. Nothing could restore his dignity. Days of conflict followed between the two families. Suhailah cried silently in her room after she was ordered to never talk to Karim again. Fights erupted between her brothers and Karim's brothers which ended with a wall built across the garden to separate the two homes and families. 1957 was the year that marked the ending of the Suez crisis and the beginning of the crisis of Mohatta street in Tuffah.

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Gaza Mayor Monir ElRayes handing Karim his First Prize award for winning Gaza's poetry contest in 1959

Sea

and

sky

Waves like wild horses neigh

Birds with foam feathers

Countless they hover

Sea

and

sky

Abdul Karim Sabawi

(10)

CINEMAS AND BEACHES: PALESTINE 1957-1958

The urgent footsteps grinding the pebbles and stones along the dirt road got louder and a dramatic voice whispered, 'Karim! Karim!' The young Tuffah poet was rudely extracted from the sweetest of fantasies. He was walking home after spending a day on the beach with his friends Raja and William. His mind's eye was busy reconstructing in detail the astonishing figures of the Armenian beauties who spent the day skipping waves in their provocative bathing suits, occasionally turning their heads slightly, and giggling at the sight of the teenage boys who watched them mesmerized. The small Armenian community in Gaza mainly kept to themselves. They were hard working, successful traders and well-mannered good neighbours. Their girls, dressed in fashionable outfits that were more revealing than those worn by the Muslim girls, were at the center of every young Gazan boy's dream.

Karim did not appreciate the interruption. He looked at the man whispering his name and saw his face under the moonlight, wrapped in a cloud of dust that rose from his feet. Marwan, from the Daraj district in the northwestern quarter of the old city, was only a few years older than Karim. He identified himself as a Ba'athist and was known for his not too subtle search for attention and glory, and his almost laughable political theatrics, that made him a burden on the reputation of any political party he belonged to. His most famous stunt was one when the Mayor of Gaza, Monir ElRayes, was imprisoned during the invasion of 1956. Marwan, at that time, was filled with envy for the way the people of Gaza spoke of their revered hero, the Mayor. Not to be outdone by him, he bought a bucket of paint and a brush and spent an entire day, painting in daylight, across the walls of Gaza's main streets: 'Down with the Zionist occupation.' Failing to attract the attention of Israeli soldiers, Marwan decided to leave his full name and address beneath the graffiti. Eventually, much to his satisfaction, he was arrested, detained and questioned for a few hours before he was let go. Those few hours in Israeli detention gave Marwan a lifetime's claim to heroism.

Looking around to make sure no one could see them, Marwan gestured to Karim to follow. Karim was partly annoyed by the interruption to his sweet Armenian fantasies, and partly intrigued by the animated character that was Marwan. The night was still young, and

Marwan, for all his faults, was a good source of entertainment. The two young men walked until they found a quiet spot under the Sedra tree.

'You know I have to be careful,' Marwan said with an air of importance. 'Since my detention, the Israelis have kept their eyes on me.'

Karim tried not to laugh. 'The Israelis detained you?' He pretended he didn't know.

'They were threatened by my resistance tactics. They wanted to break me. But I gave them nothing.' Marwan lit up a cigarette and began to tell his tall tales. 'The Israeli generals pointed their rifles at me and asked me who I was. I said, I am the son of Arab resistance. They asked me who my family was, I told them I come from the family of the million martyrs.'

Karim couldn't help himself but laugh out loud. 'And what do you need me for?' he asked. Marwan chose to ignore the laughter and to push on with his pitch. 'I hear you are a gifted writer,' he told Karim. 'You do the writing, I do the leg work. I can bring crowds to protests, I can put your words on flyers and distribute them, and together we can do great things. The revolution needs us both!'

With these words, Marwan had Karim's attention. The two young men formed a strategic alliance. Karim wrote flyers that he hoped would revolutionize the world, and Marwan did the leg work of handing them out and drawing people to the protests. The message at the heart of the movement was resistance to Israel's occupation and support for pan-Arab nationalism.

Karim's political work attracted some unwanted attention. Factions who often competed to recruit young talent, were impressed by Karim's gift for words and began to pressure him to join, but Karim refused. It was important for him to maintain his independence of thought, even if it meant missing out on having organizational support. Factions looked after their own; they printed and published their work, they offered them platforms to speak, they helped them tour other countries to spread their ideology and they even looked after the families of members. But all of this, was of no value to Karim, if it meant surrendering his freedom to think critically and independently, outside of factional politics.

The sixteen-year-old mostly stayed away from the Muslim Brotherhood, even though they were the most active in armed resistance at the time. Karim, who strongly believed in modernity, progressive thinking and non-violent tactics, preferred to be courted by left-leaning factions, such as socialists, Marxists and communists. He was closer in his ideals to their way of thinking, and, more importantly, they knew how to enjoy art, poetry, music and they had a good taste in movies.

Being under Egyptian administration at a time when Egypt was going through a cultural renaissance meant Gaza was becoming a benefactor of Egypt's golden years. Egyptian cinema, music, and publishing houses were thriving platforms for innovation, creativity and critical thought, much of which trickled down to Gaza. Every time a high-profile dignitary visited Egypt, President Gamal Abdel Nasser brought them to Gaza to learn about Palestine and the Palestinian cause. Gaza received many international delegations and committees as a result. Even world leaders were brought to Gaza, and Karim, the skinny boy from Tuffah, would chase their cars, and shake hands with historic figures including Yugoslavian President Josip Broz Tito, the Latin American revolutionary Ernesto Che Guevara and of course Gamal Abdel Nasser himself.

The summer months went by. Karim spent his time between the cinema, the beach and the nightly revolutionary meetings, writing, reading and dreaming of a big future. But every night, as he began to fall asleep, an image of Suhailah would appear illuminating his mind's eye and casting its brilliant light upon all thoughts and images; even the figures of the Armenian girls skipping the waves, would fade under her bright light.

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September came around and Gaza's life cycle began once more with another school year. Mothers in Tuffah mended and patched hand-me-down uniforms, shoes, school bags and books. Fatima finally pushed the last of her army of boys and girls out the front door and strolled down to the Sheik's home for her usual morning coffee served with a side of treason. The two families were still officially at war, but the women did not comply with the declaration of separation, making daily incursions into one another's territory.

Fatima was a believer in the art of soft diplomacy and in the power of women to shape destiny. She could have intervened to pressure her husband to accept Karim's proposal, but she chose not to. She wanted Karim to grow up a little more and to work very hard at earning Suhailah. She believed that the harder you work for something, the more appreciative you become of its value. Karim was angry at Fatima's lack of intervention. He couldn't understand why she didn't force Abu-Awny's hand. After all, everyone knew she called the shots. So, Karim avoided Fatima for a long time, until that morning when he literally collided with her as he was rushing out the door and she was walking in.

Fatima's face was made more beautiful by her glowing smile when she saw him. 'How are you?' she tenderly asked. Karim looked at her with explosive anger. 'I am fine Mrs. Fatima,' he said.

'Mrs. Fatima? What ever happened to aunty Fatima? Am I no longer an aunty?'

'I have no aunties.' Karim shot his words before picking up his pace and walking away as fast as he could, leaving behind the streets of Tuffah and all the heart ache that was there.

That night, Karim and Raja met at the Al Samer cinema to watch, for the third time, the Egyptian romantic comedy *Ghazal al Banat*, starring Leila Murad and Najeeb AlReehany, a story of impossible love that steered Karim's emotions and reminded him of his own tragic love story. Afterwards, the two young men went to the café across the road from the theatre where avid moviegoers often congregated to battle plot twists, character build ups, dramatic arches and better endings. Karim ordered a cup of tea with mint and sat quietly listening to the war that erupted between those who liked the ending of the film and those who thought love must triumph above all else and those who didn't.

A familiar voice shouted through the crowd: 'What if there was a wall? How does love triumph over the wall?' Karim recognised the sarcastic tone. It belonged to Azmy, Suhailah's over-protective older brother. Azmy walked over toward Karim, and Karim braced himself for another fight, but was taken by surprise when Azmy offered him a bottle of ice-cold Coka-Cola. It was more useful to him in that heat than his much cheaper cup of tea.

Karim accepted Azmy's peace offering with a dash of suspicion. 'Why did your father reject me?' he asked him bluntly.

Pulling a seat next to Karim, Azmy smiled, 'Because he says you are no good for her. He says you waste your days between beaches and cinemas.'

'What else is there to do in Gaza?' Karim defended himself. 'The beaches soothe the soul and the cinema ignites the imagination. It's an education. A window into the world. Besides, you know how well I'm doing at school and that I also tutor after school.' Azmy listened to Karim with friendly interest. Karim continued, 'Azmy, I'm not idle. I'm a responsible young man who can provide and feed a family. I love your sister. I will take great care of her.'

'Why her?' Azmy's question came almost as an unexpected surprise. Why her? Karim never asked himself this question. It was always her. No one else but her. 'Some questions cannot be answered,' he said to Azmy. 'Some feelings cannot be described in words. Suhailah is a part of me. She is a part of who I am. If I lose her, I will live the rest of my life missing a part of myself. Please Azmy, you know that no one else in the world will take better care of her or love her the way I do.'

'Well…' Azmy said. 'It was nice catching up. I'd better go home. I have work to do.'

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Suhailah had many suitors come to her house asking for her hand. But none that her family accepted. They were either too short, or too tall, or too fat, or too rude, or too stingy or poor. Finally, after months of seeing suitors, her father found someone he liked, a groom who had money, a good reputation and did not look bad. The groom's mother was in love with Suhailah so much, she came to their house many times begging for her hand. Suhailah saw her one night kissing her father's hand. '*Allah yakhalik,* may God give you long life,' she said to Abu-Awny. 'Allow your daughter to marry my son. He will make her very happy!'

When the woman left, Abu-Awny said to Fatima, 'I think this is the one.' Suhailah was mortified and ran into her room crying. Fatima didn't appear moved by Suhailah's protest exit.

She calmly told Abu-Awny, 'You are her father. This is ultimately your decision. But tradition dictates that you must consult with her big brother Azmy. He will be home soon.'

This was a game Fatima excelled at playing. She knew how to be a hidden, driving force for the big events in their lives. She knew it was time to act, and she had already dispatched Azmy to talk to Karim, knowing that when he came home, he would be fighting in Karim's corner. She was not wrong. Azmy came home, and Suhailah could hear his voice telling her father: '*Yubba*, this man, this groom, he is a stranger to us. He is too old for Suhailah and we don't know anything about him. He will take her away from here to live in a faraway district with his family. We will not know anything about her life. But Karim, he's one of us. There is nothing we don't know about him. He is smart, he works and earns money and we know that he loves her.'

The next day, fifteen-year-old Suhailah came home from her fashion design vocational school, and something unusual was in the air. Her mother greeted her at the door. 'Here comes our beautiful bride!' She said hugging her. Suhailah's heart sank and the first thought that came to mind was that her family had accepted the last suitor's offer. But before her tears started to fall, Azmy smiled at her and said, 'Congratulations! Karim is coming to ask for your hand and our father said he is ready to accept.'

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'*Ya Sater*!' Karim announced his arrival. Suhailah dropped her plate and ran to her room. Nervous, she slammed the door shut, and stuck her ear to the door, listening intently, trying to hear the conversation outside, over the loud sound of her fast pounding heart. Karim sat down and asked, one more time, for Suhailah's hand in marriage. This time, Abu-Awny nodded his approval, but it was Fatima who began making conditions. 'My daughter does not know how to cook or clean,' she said. 'She is not to be a servant in your home and to your parents.'

Karim's response was surprising and entirely untraditional, 'I'm prepared to wear an apron and to be her servant.'

Fatima let out a joyful *Zaghroota*, a ululation that resonated across the district. The engagement was finally official and new elements were introduced into Karim and Suhailah's relationship. Karim became bolder with his expressions of love and Suhailah shyer and more nervous. He sat too close; she could feel his hot breath on her bare neck. He stared too long and she didn't know where to rest her eyes away from the fire in his. He demanded of everyone around him to treat her with reverence; he even made his students stand-up whenever she walked by.

The week of the wedding celebration finally came around. Fatima spared no cost preparing her daughter's outfits, which included a collection of seven elegant wedding dresses, in seven different colors to be worn every night of the week-long celebration. The white wedding dress was reserved for *dokhla*, the final night, when the bride and groom were to be joined together, behind a closed door. Suhailah totally surrendered to her mother's wishes. She was like a doll being dressed up and down and moved around in accordance with the various ceremonies. Salma, the beautician of the Tuffah district, became almost a full-time resident at Abu-Awny's home.

Meanwhile, the 16-year-old Karim's income, and that of his father's, could barely cover the cost of the beverages, sweets and lights used to decorate the garden between the two homes. Karim borrowed money to have his suit tailored, although he didn't much appreciate the tailor's insulting comments. 'Who's wedding is this?' he asked Karim. When Karim told him it was his own wedding, the tailor let out a sarcastic laugh, 'Do you even know how to be a groom? You're still in school aren't' you?'

Times were changing fast in Gaza as in all of Palestine. Parents were insisting that their children, especially their sons, finish university before they got married. But it was evident that Karim was no follower of trends. He knew what he wanted and wild horses could not have kept him away from his beloved.

On the final day of celebration, Karim's friends chipped in to pay for *Janaki* dancers. At first, the Sheik was apprehensive about the idea, but decided to turn a blind eye in spite of his wife and mother's protests. 'This is a respectable home,' his mother reproached him. 'Let them have fun,' he told her, 'it's a wedding.' Moftiya didn't need too much convincing once she found out that the dancers were paid for by Karim's friends. But Khadija remained

unhappy. She didn't want the Sheik's eyes to wander too far. The *Janaki* often wore less than modest clothes as they sang and danced provocatively at wedding parties with the overt purpose of arousing the bride and the groom. The *Janaki* were managed by a small community of Arab-Jews who, since Israel's establishment in 1948, had began to notably decrease in Gaza.

The days and nights of celebration were exhausting. Karim and Suhailah met briefly during various ceremonies only to bait each other like two fighters in a ring. The only day they spent more time together was when they travelled to the Armenian photographer's studio in Omar Al-Mokhtar Street to have wedding photos taken together; one in the black dress and one in the white.

On the final day of the wedding, expectations for Karim were high. Suhailah's family cooked a big meal for the bride. 'Eat !' her mother coaxed her. 'You need to eat well. Tonight is a big night for you, and Karim will eat you up!' The women giggled and exchanged stories of ravishment on their wedding night. Suhailah listened with excitement and fear as she allowed the women to wash her, dress her and constantly feed her. Someone always fixed her hair, carried her dress, refreshed her make-up, while all the while she was being told not to exhaust herself and to save her energy for the night to come.

Across the garden, Karim was running around receiving guests, hosting, fetching and running … and doing it all on an empty stomach. The Sheik's home was depleted of any money or food outside of what was to be offered to the hordes of guests.

Finally, when the wedding and reception ended, Suhailah and Karim were led to their room. Fatima told Suhailah that she'd be outside her door in case she needed anything, and to call her if there were any problems. Moftiya and Khadija told Karim he must let them know as soon as the marriage was consummated so they could let out the final *zaghrootas* before they could all go to bed.

As soon as the door was shut, Karim, the young man who chased Suhailah around for years, looked at his beautiful bride, smiled, then collapsed from exhaustion. Suhailah, who was equally as tired, was relieved and fell asleep in her wedding dress next to him.

Fatima sat with Moftiya and Khadija outside the room for hours, but all they could hear was silence. Eventually, the three women gave up on the young couple and they too went to sleep.

The next morning, Fatima brought a tray of stuffed pigeons to feed the starving groom. Fueled by the hearty and delicious meal and feeling more at ease with the pressure to perform lifted, Suhailah and Karim finally became man and wife.

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Karim and Suhailah’s weddeing photos

Listen
Carefully
This thunder
This explosion
Is Nasser the Arab
Entering the battlefield
Every day he delivers victory
And spreads revolutions across the land
Turning every one of us into revolutionaries

Abdel Karim Sabawi

(11)

CROSSROADS: PALESTINE 1959 – 1963

Karim ran into the classroom panting for breath. The Year 11 student was late for school. His classmates whistled and snickered, and the teacher, smiling, ordered them to stand up for the young groom. Late students were often reprimanded and punished, but Karim was much loved and admired by his teachers who often treated him as one of their peers. Karim enjoyed the attention and respect he received, and he acted with the maturity expected of a young married man, a tutor and a soon-to-be father, at least most of the time. But there were mornings like these, when Karim might have enjoyed staying in bed with his young wife just a little longer than he should have. For those late mornings, his teachers liked to tease him by giving him a standing ovation. Even the Egyptian principal Mahmoud Shehab, a man known for his strict disciplinary measures, even he often turned a blind eye to Karim's almost regular violations. 'This boy is gifted linguistically and romantically,' he often mused whenever Karim's name came up.

Suhailah's warm embrace was not Karim's only haven from the pressures of studying and working; neither was she his only distraction. Karim had a few other passions: the cinema, the beach and poetry. He participated in every poetry contest in Gaza and he always came first. Recently, he had been awarded the highest poetry prize in an official ceremony that included some important guests and poets from Egypt as well as from other cities in Palestine. His prize, a poetry medal, was handed to him by the Mayor Monir ElRayes himself.

As for his other passions, there were many times when Karim skipped classes to daydream on the beach or to go to see a movie. Once, he was walking out of the theatre, having watched Egyptian actress Suad Hosni in all her glory on the silver screen, in the movie *Eshaat Hob, A Rumor of Love*, when he saw his neighbour Abu Sa'adah walking in a hurry across the road. Karim was afraid the man saw him and might go home to tell his father that he wasn't in school. So he ran after him to explain. After exchanging quick greetings, Karim told Abu Sa'adah that skipping French was a matter of duty and principle. 'I'm practicing civil disobedience,' he told the man, 'by refusing to learn the language of the country that colonised and brutalised Algeria and its people.'

Abu Sa'adah couldn't really care less about France, or French classes. '*Tayeb*…*tayeb*…fine…' he said dismissively, 'I'm in a hurry to go, I don't want to miss the land lottery.' Abu Sa'adah waved goodbye and left in a hurry. 'The Land Lottery!' Karim thought. He had heard about the way the Egyptian government had divided up some large publicly owned lots in Gaza and was selling them for a nominal cost using a lottery system. Allowing his impulsive and curious nature to take hold of him, 'This could be the opportunity of a lifetime!' he thought.

Karim made his way through the much older crowd of men who gathered in hope of becoming land owners and registered his name on a piece of paper, folded it and slipped it into a large box. 'So, what is up for sale next?' he asked. 'Mashrou Amer,' the voice behind the box said, 'the lot consists of twenty dunams up in the north by the seaside.'

Abu Sa'adah became irritable when he saw Karim standing in the sea of men. How he envied the Sheik for having a son with so much ambition, energy and resourcefulness! It was one thing to outshine young men his own age, but to come out to compete with men of his father's generation was too much for Abu Sa'adah to accept.

'You're too young and you don't have enough money… not even a minimal amount,' he shouted at Karim across the crowd. 'Go home, son!' Karim ignored his neighbour, and the glares of the men around him.

The Egyptian clerk stepped forward. He began to read the specifics of the lot before he read its price, 'This lot is called Mashrou-Amer. It consists of 20 beach side dunams, in the north Gaza district. It can be purchased for as little as 5,000 Egyptian pounds by the lucky winner. A deposit of 50 pounds is required upon signing the contract.'

There was some movement in the crowd. A few men left after hearing the price, which, although it was truly a token amount for the value of the land, was not something they could ever dream of raising. Abu Sa'adah looked at Karim, waiting for him to leave, but Karim had made his mind up. He would stay the course and try out his luck and see where it took him. What could he possibly lose?

The Egyptian clerk stretched his hands forward and into the box and pulled out a piece of paper. He looked up at the crowd with a little dramatic flair and called out, ‘Abdul Karim Sabawi!’

‘That’s my name!’ Karim’s joy couldn’t have been measured. He didn’t expect to win. His mind was in a euphoric state that didn’t for one second allow him to hesitate.

‘He doesn’t have the money!’ Abu Sa’adah called out from the crowd. ‘We need to try again. A redraw please! He is just a boy!’

Karim looked at Abu Sa’adah and he realized that his good neighbour at that point was actually fearful for him. ‘It’s ok. I can manage the money,’ he told him. ‘Trust me.’ Sitting in the front row overseeing the signing of the deeds was the Acting-Administrator for Gaza, Said Abu-Sharik. Karim recognised him immediately. He was the man sitting close to the Mayor when Karim received the Poetry Prize. So, with confidence, Karim walked up to him and asked if he could sign and pay the deposit in a few days. Abu-Sharik thought for a minute. ‘You are an honest man and a brilliant poet, with a promising future,’ he said. ‘Of course, I will allow it.’

Karim signed the deeds and walked home with Abu-Sa’adah. ‘Do you have fifty Egyptian pounds?’ asked his curious neighbour. ‘To be honest,’ Karim replied, ‘I don’t even have five coins to buy shaving cream.’ The two men walked back to Mohatta Street, one weighed down by life’s demands, the other floating, dreaming of a piece of land he was certain he would own.

The next day, Karim, with the power of his words, was able to convince one of his neighbours to lend him the 500 pounds and to become a partner with him in the ownership of the land. And that was how Karim, the poor boy from Tuffah, the young man with not enough money to buy shaving cream, that was how he, overnight, became that almost impossible thing – a land owner.

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Content. If Suhailah was to be described in one word, it would be content. What more could she ask for? The small bedroom she shared with Karim was an entire universe. Her neatly organized drawers and cupboards were filled with stylish clothes, romance novels, a bridal collection of lingerie, and unfinished sewing projects. The bed was a world of passion, discovery and adventure, where her days began and where her nights ended. She had no need for anything more.

Suhailah's light presence brought a softness and a sense of beauty to the Sheik's household. The two matriarchs, Khadija and Moftiya, exempted her from their ongoing squabbles. Maybe they both hoped to win Suhailah's strategic allegiance. Maybe they felt she was too young to be used as cannon fodder for their territorial battles. Maybe, they were just enchanted by the young woman's presence. Or, maybe, they were scared of upsetting her, because that would bring upon them the wrath of not only her feisty mother Fatima, and her adoring husband Karim, but also the wrath of the head patriarch, the Sheik. Suhailah's femininity stood in strong contrast with Moftiya and Khadija's coarse skin and dreary wardrobes. She was an alluring radiant gem in the masculine landscape that characterized the Sheik's home.

The Sheik loved Suhailah's company. He always invited her to sit and eat with him and he welcomed her into his classroom as an honorary student without weighing her down with the pressure of tests or homework. In the evenings when the family gathered, and Karim and Suhailah sat next to each other, the Sheik often whispered a prayer; '*Allah Karim*, God is generous!' God had taken away the Sheik's legs and rewarded him for his faith with six healthy sons and a half a dozen legs that can walk, run and jump on his behalf. God took away his daughter Amal and rewarded his patience and his long wait for a daughter, with Suhailah. 'Do you know what your name means?' he once asked. 'Yes, it is from the name Suhail, a bright star in the Southern Constellation,' she answered. 'Well done!' The Sheik said. 'You are the brightest star in our constellation.'

Then came the pregnancy, followed by news of her family's unexpected eminent departure! Suhailah's euphoria was tainted by anxiety, nausea and morning sickness. Her world was turned upside down. She lost her appetite for food and for company.

‘Yumma, what do you mean you’re leaving?’ Suhailah sobbed watching her mother pack. ‘I’m pregnant. You can’t leave me now.’

Fatima did not want to leave. ‘I wish I could stay,’ she told Suhailah. ‘But your brother is in trouble.’

Suhailah’s oldest brother Awny had grown restless working in his father’s scrap store. He dreamed of a better future beyond Gaza and Palestine’s horizons. One day, with only the shirt on his back, he left heading toward the Arabian Gulf, seeking his fortune in the new cities that were rising out of the desert dunes. His luck, or lack thereof, brought him as far as Saudi Arabia and abandoned him there. His parents received word from relatives that he had landed himself in financial trouble and was in need of being rescued. ‘You are now with your new family,’ Fatima told Suhailah as she hugged her goodbye. ‘They will love and care for you.’

Before leaving, Fatima gave detailed instructions to Khadija and Moftiya on how to care for the pregnant young bride. Although both women were experts in the maternity field, and annoyed by the redundant information they were receiving, Khadija and Moftiya decided to let the emotional mother say what she wanted. ‘God help all mothers!’ Khadija said as she held Suhailah in her embrace, crying with her at the scene of Abu-Awny’s family departure. Moftiya was not one for tears; she took her role as the oldest matriarch seriously and recited the Throne Verse from the *Holy Quran* as the car drove away, praying for God to keep them safe along their journey.

Fatima’s absence was glaring. Karim’s family tried to compensate Suhailah by being gentler and more attentive to her needs. Karim even helped Suhailah wash their clothes in the plastic tub. The two often sat side by side on the floor, with their hands working through the soapy lather, blowing bubbles at one another, and slowly getting through their load, one piece at a time. Moftiya and Khadija took turns watching from afar, raising their eyebrows and twitching their mouths in disbelief. Still they said nothing, allowing this bold break from tradition, this careless casting aside of generations of rules and neatly divided gender roles, to pass under their watch.

In the spring of 1960, Suhailah at seventeen, and Karim at eighteen years of age, were blessed with a baby girl. They named her Khulud.

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With an infant who cried through the night, classes in the morning, students to tutor in the afternoon, and homework to complete in the evenings, it was nothing short of a miracle that Karim not only graduated high school, but that he also did well enough to be accepted into Law at Cairo University. Karim received news of his acceptance with trepidation. His mind was telling him to seize the opportunity, and to let the chips fall where they may, but his heart sang a different tune. His heart was in Gaza, and with his responsibilities as husband, father and oldest son.

Carrying the acceptance letter in his hand, Karim took slow steps along Mohatta Street toward his home. He thought about Suhailah, their daughter Khulud and now the new baby that was on the way. How could he possibly leave them behind? He thought about the Sheik and his ever-declining income as more students registered in government day schools and he thought about his mother and his five younger brothers who had become dependent on him.

Karim's thoughts were interrupted by the cries of the fruit sellers under the gigantic Tamarix tree. He remembered how much Suhailah had been craving apples since the beginning of her second pregnancy. He stuck his hands deep into his pockets, but all he could find was two piasters, hardly enough to buy apples for everyone at home. So, he bought just one, and hid it in his pocket.

Moftiya was the first to greet him when he stepped into the Sheik's room for the nightly family gathering. She inhaled the aroma of the apple, breathing its sweet scent deeply into her lungs, before she slowly exhaled. Years had passed since the last time she tasted an apple. The fruit was not grown locally, and the ones sold in the market stalls were too expensive for the Sheik's family to afford. Karim froze, expecting Moftiya to lecture him on the evils of squandering one's money, but instead she walked away and said nothing. The apple was so fragrant, it wasn't long before everyone else got a whiff of its delicious scent. Karim's brothers began circling him, like hungry sharks. The Sheik had no choice but to intervene; 'Karim,' he said. 'Your wife looks tired. Take her inside to lay down.' Khadija and the Sheik exchanged smiles as Karim grabbed Suhailah's hand and the two disappeared into their bedroom.

Suhailah ate the apple as slowly as she could, savoring every bite, as she listened to Karim read his letter of acceptance to Cairo University. She had a calmness that puzzled him. 'What do you think?' he prompted her. 'I think this is wonderful!' she said. 'If I accept the offer,' Karim explained. 'You would be here without me.' 'No,' she smiled with incredible confidence. 'We will always be together! You will always find a way to keep us together.' Karim knew she was right. 'If I go to Cairo,' he said watching her bite into her apple. 'You and Khulud… and this baby in your belly, can come with me. I could find work and study at the same time. Just like I did the last few years!'

Later that night, Karim told his father. The Sheik was filled with pride for his son. If he was worried about Karim leaving, he certainly did not show it. He encouraged Karim to apply for a visa to Egypt and to see what would happen next.

**

Karim was infatuated with Egypt: *Om Aldonya,* mother of the world, the cradle of post-colonial resistance and the forefront of Arab Nationalism. He believed in its revolutionary, anti-colonialist President Gamal Abdel Nasser, who mocked and defeated England, France and Israel, and he loved Egyptian music, culture and literature. In return for his love, Karim expected Egypt to throw her arms around him and take him in like he was one of her own, or even better. After all, Nasser ordered Egyptian universities to exempt Palestinian students from many of the entry requirements. When asked why Palestinians were given exemptions that Egyptians didn't qualify for, he said 'Palestinians were dispossessed and disarmed. I want to arm them with education.' This was the Egypt that Karim loved!

He took his birth certificate and his university offer, and he imagined that he would receive a student visa on the spot. He imagined the visa to be a piece of paper, a permit he would wave at the border crossing, but instead, he received what felt like a slap on the face. The Egyptian officer demanded that Karim present him with a passport, 'Why do I need a passport? Egypt is the government in charge.' Karim couldn't understand how Gaza could be under Egyptian rule, but still, Palestinians in Gaza wouldn't be allowed to travel into Egypt without a passport. Or, how Nasser could advocate for Arab nationalism, but have strict rules for Palestinians crossing into Egypt.

‘I’m a Palestinian. I don’t have a passport,’ Karim told the officer. The Officer wiped the pearls of sweat streaming down his face and tilted his head slightly, to see the growing line of young men forming behind Karim. He was annoyed at the thought of having to repeat the same words over and over again, to each and every student who stood in line. So, he raised his voice for all to hear, ‘We can’t process your Visa application if you don’t have a passport. Those without passports must first apply for a refugee travel document. Only then you can apply for a visa to enter Egypt.’

Karim wasn’t easily convinced that this was the end of the conversation. ‘There is a mistake,’ he said to the man. ‘I’m not a refugee. I am from Gaza. I live in the same home my father was born into.’

‘Son,’ the Officer said, exasperated, ‘No country, no government, no passport, no visa. May God help you, just register as a refugee and get a travel document. Next please!’

Karim dragged his feet home. At first, he didn’t want to pursue this any further, but he convinced himself that registering as a refugee was a necessary means to an end. As he expected, the process felt like utter humiliation. To be in one’s own home and be considered a refugee was more than he could bear, but he went through with it, and applied for a travel ID.

Then came the second slap on the face. The Officer processing his visa application called him in for an interview. ‘We might have to deny your application,’ he told him. ‘Your name has come up on the Muslim Brotherhood list, and as you know, the brotherhood is banned from entry into Egypt.’

‘I am a supporter of Nasser!’ Karim shot back. ‘I don’t belong to any faction, and I certainly have no involvement with the Muslim Brotherhood.’ The Officer said nothing. For the next few minutes, the Officer stared, smiled and nodded sympathetically, as Karim dug deep into his word arsenal, searching desperately for the right phrase to persuade the officer to help him. In the end, just as he turned around to leave, a man watching the exchange whispered in Karim’s ear, ‘Son, all he’s looking for is a little bribe, then your application can go smoothly.’ Karim looked back at the Officer, who smiled and nodded, and he finally understood the rules of the game. ‘No,’ he said to the man. ‘If this is their Egypt, I want none of it.’

This was a milestone in Karim's life. He was free falling into the crack between a leader's ideals and the behavior of the common man. Leaders were not Gods, even the best of them could only go so far to change the culture and behavior of those they rule over, and those who surround them.

When Karim left the embassy, he did not feel anger or disappointment. Instead, he felt a deep sense of relief. Was he just waiting to find a reason to opt out of leaving? Was it the dehumanizing process of assuming a status of refugee in one's own homeland? Was it his repulsion at the corruption of the officers at the embassy? Or, was it his deep sense of duty toward his father, wife and family? No matter what, he was convinced that he was not meant to leave and that he had an important role to play at home.

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At Mashrou Amer, Karim ran his fingers into the sand creating the perfect circle around the castle. 'I give you the moat!' he announced. Suhailah laughed. 'I don't want to destroy your ego but the little princess you're building the castle for has abandoned you for a game of chase and run with the waves.'

'I don't blame her,' Karim said. 'This is not my greatest work. One day, I will build something much more impressive than a castle in the sand!'

'A house with big windows facing the sea?'

'Maybe. Or, maybe something much bigger than that. A place where poets, artists, intellectuals can gather. Perhaps a theatre… .'

'Inshallah!' Suhailah said, placing her hand gently on his shoulder. 'I still can't believe we own this land!'

Karim pulled her hand. 'Come here! Sit down with me!' He opened up his arms. 'Don't worry, I'll make you comfortable!'

Suhailah placed her hand on her large belly. ‘Don’t promise what you can’t deliver. Besides, if I sit down, you will need to hire a forklift to get me back on my feet again.’

Khulud seized the opportunity and ran into her father’s open arms. Karim was beside himself with joy! ‘Sing for Baba!’ he held her tight and she sang to the beat of the waves, *‘Thahaba allaylo Talaa alfagroo’*. At only 18 months of age, Khulud was walking, talking and singing.

Suhailah’s eyes welled up with tears. She could no longer hold back the dreaded question she had on her mind all day. ‘What happened at the Egyptian embassy?’ she finally asked. ‘Did they say your visa will be approved?’

Karim smiled. He had waited for her to ask. ‘I decided to stay here, and to accept the full-time teaching position I was offered at Saladin Primary School. Does that make you happy?’

Suhailah breathed a sigh of relief. Beneath her calm and confident exterior, she had deeply agonized about the possibility of Karim leaving, but she never wanted to give him the satisfaction of knowing that she needed him as much as she needed the air she breathed. She did not answer Karim’s question. Of course, she was happy, but Fatima had taught her well. She always told her, ‘Never let your husband know how much you love him. Men like to chase, so make sure your man is constantly chasing you!

Karim loved the chase, but he knew it was just a game. He understood Suhailah so well, he could read her like an open book! ‘You only grow more beautiful every day!’ he told her as he watched the way the wind forced her dress to cling to her pregnant body.

Laughing, Suhailah rubbed her large belly, ‘You’re half right,’ she responded. ‘I only grow!’

At night, Khulud slept in Karim’s arms, while Suhailah laid down on her side next to him, her belly moving in waves as the baby tossed and turned inside her womb. Karim felt at peace. The nineteen-year old’s life was making perfect sense. His daughter was in his arms, his wife was by his side with a new baby on the way, his poetry was flowing, and with a new

full-time job at the school, he was guaranteed a salary that could cover his and his family's basic needs.

When Khulud fell asleep, he placed her in the bassinet next to the bed. 'Suhailah,' he whispered seductively. 'You know there is only one way for me to help make you deliver this baby fast!' Suhailah giggled, and Karim felt as though the world's deepest secrets were finally about to be revealed.

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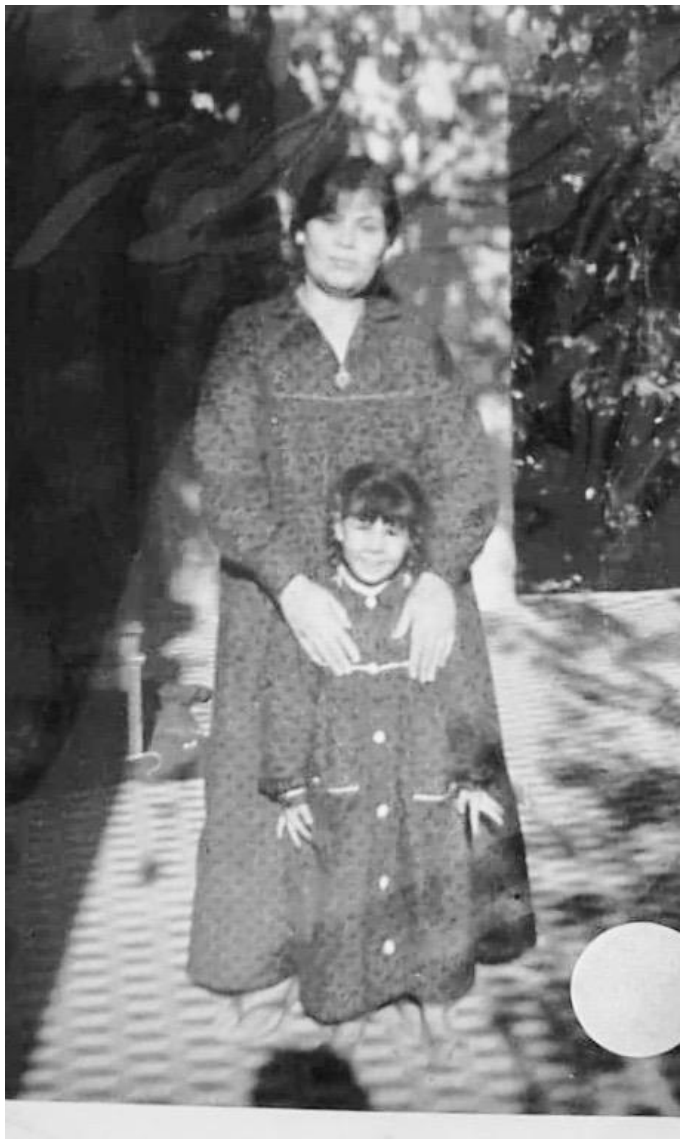

Suhailah with Khulud c. 1964

For Khulud on her second birthday

Two years my little one
A word is all I can gift you
Will you accept my gift?
Or are you like the others…
Unappreciative of a word
I squeezed it from my wounds
I melted it into my flesh and soul
Who dares claim words are hallow?
Worthless?
I burnt into the fire for this word
It is worth my yearning… and my youth
To live as I want
To say what I want
Two years
My little one you will grow
And you will too know
The worth of this word

Abdul Karim Sabawi 1962

(12)

A NEWSPAPER FOR REFUGEES: PALESTINE 1963

Karim's eyes scanned the crowd as he stood behind the podium of the newly opened Arab Cultural Centre. Sitting in the front row, only a few feet across from him, were the Egyptian Governor General of the Gaza Strip, Yusuf al Ajrudi, Gaza's mayor Monir ElRayes and other distinguished guests including highly decorated Egyptian army Generals. The humidity and heat in the room was unbearable. He wiped the sweat off his face and smiled at the Mayor, who smiled back and nodded, urging him to begin.

Karim's gift for poetry, coupled with his fine intellect and astonishing photographic memory, had opened up many doors. Gaza, like the rest of the Arab world at that time, celebrated its poets and believed in the power of words: to teach, remember, transform, resist and inspire. As a regular winner of Gaza's poetry contests, Karim's poetry was published in literary magazines and he was invited to perform at prestigious official ceremonies. But this night carried special significance.

The opening of the Arab Cultural Centre in Gaza by direct orders from Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser attracted elite Egyptian and Palestinian cultural figures from some prominent newspapers and literary journals. The Centre was a grand gift for the people of Gaza and Karim responded to this gift by crafting a poem in classical Arabic, using perfect metrical patterns in praise of the revolutionary president. The auditorium roared with applause, whistles and calls for 'encore'. Later that night, Karim was introduced to Sa'ad AlDein AlWelely, from Egypt's national newspaper *Akhbar el-Yom*. At first, AlWelely expressed his admiration for Karim's poetry, then he began asking him one question after the next. 'How old are you?' 'What do you do for a living?' 'What was the highest level of education?' 'Do you belong to any faction?' 'What is your political ideology?' 'Where do you live?'

Karim began to feel nervous. Was this an interrogation? Did he say something that may offend the political establishment in Egypt? Despite having developed many reservations about the men who served under Nasser, especially the handful of corrupt officers who regularly squeezed the people of Gaza for bribes, Karim still believed in Egypt the nation, and in Nasser the leader, so why was he being interrogated now?

Karim answered as best as he could. ‘I’m twenty-one years old. I teach at Saladin Primary. I’ve deferred university so I can support my family. I’m married and have two daughters. I don’t belong to any factions. My political ideology is progressive and humanist ideals....’

AlWelely nodded his head as he listened to Karim’s answers. Finally, he stood up, and handed Karim his business card. ‘We’re going into partnership with a new Palestinian newspaper, *Akhbar Felesteen*, that will be based in the Gaza Strip. We’re looking to build a competent editorial team. I think you’d make the perfect editor. The newspaper’s work is mostly done in the afternoon, so it should fit in well with your day job.’

Karim’s heart nearly stopped. An editor in a newspaper! This was a job interview? All that Karim wanted at that moment was to jump up and down and shout his excitement from the top of his lungs, but instead, he made every effort to remain calm and to act with the maturity the situation required. ‘Thank you!’ he said, enthusiastically shaking AlWelely’s hand.

‘You must meet with Zuhair ElRayes,’ AlWelely said as he headed toward his car. ‘He can confirm your appointment to the editorial board. Try to impress him as much as you have impressed me!’

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Karim quietly rolled out of bed. He put on his best shirt and pants, swept up Khulud in one arm and lifted Abir in the other, leaving Suhailah alone on the bed to catch up on her lost sleep. The six-month-old Abir was still feeding through the night, leaving Suhailah constantly hungry and tired.

Karim stepped out into the yard and walked across to the Sheik’s room. ‘Yumma!’ he called out to Khadija. ‘I brought you two gifts!’

Khadija quickly took Abir into her arms, complaining that she only seemed to receive this gift whenever her cloth napkin was in need of change. Khulud, on the other hand, escaped from her father’s grip and ran straight to the Sheik. ‘*Sido*, would you like me to recite the

alphabets?' Before the Sheik had a chance to accept or decline, Khulud began '*Alef, ba, ta*…' When she finally reached the last letter '*ya*', the Sheik clapped. 'You are my favorite student,' he said. 'Now, get me some tomatoes and chilies from the garden so I can make breakfast. Is Suhailah joining us this morning?' he asked Karim.

'Suhailah will need to eat more than just tomatoes and chilies,' Karim answered, as he dramatically produced two eggs from his sleeves. Before Moftiya exploded into outrage, he quickly explained, '*Sitty*, these are not your eggs. I bought these yesterday from the chicken farm down the road.'

Moftiya was not convinced, but there was nothing she could do or say. She closely guarded her hens and was the first to wake up daily at dawn to collect their eggs. She relied on the money she earned from selling the eggs to maintain her financial independence. A strong believer that every person must have full autonomy, she often repeated her motto in life: 'One must keep their fortune and their misery to themselves!' Was Karim stealing her eggs in the dead of night? She couldn't be sure. 'Still, poor Karim,' she found herself thinking. 'His salary is hardly enough to feed his five growing brothers, his parents, and his wife and daughters.' But she couldn't let him get away with this. 'You spoil your wife too much,' she scorned. 'All of this and she only gave you two daughters? What would you do if she gives you a son?'

Without missing a beat, Karim shot back, 'Spoil her even more of course!' Karim loved teasing his grandmother. He saw through her iron exterior how much she loved him. '*Sitty,*' he held her bristly hand and kissed it. 'I need your blessings; today is my first day at the newspaper.'

'May Allah grant you all that your heart desires!' Moftiya mumbled. She slowly walked away, feeling a tiny piece of her heart secretly melting beneath her bony rib cage.

**

At the first ringing of the bell, Karim threw himself into the tsunami of primary school students who made their way, pushing and shoving out of the school building, and ran all the way to Omar Al-Mokhtar street. He didn't want to be late for his first meeting with Zuhair ElRayes, Editor in Chief and Zaki AlRadwan Editing Manager of the soon-to-be-established

newspaper, *Akhbar Felesteen*. The two men were notable iconic figures in cultural circles. That they were able to convince a giant like the Egyptian newspaper *Akhbar el-Yom* to form a partnership with them was testament to their visionary outlook and resourcefulness.

The Egyptian editorial team was headed by one of the prominent Amin brothers, the founders of Egypt's modern western style press. *Ostath* Amin began the meeting by acknowledging the efforts of Zuhair ElRayes and Zaki AlRadwan in the creation of this partnership, and in the birthing of this new and much needed newspaper. He also welcomed Elias Azzam, the nominated Editorial Secretary, and the newly nominated board. Karim's heart exploded when his name was included.

'You should all be excited to be part of this historic moment,' Ostath Amin went on to say. 'Together, we will launch the largest newspaper to be published in print and in distribution in Gaza, in Palestine, since the 1948 *El-Nakba*. We, at Egypt's *Akhbar el-Yom* will supply you with modern state of the art printers, we will train you on how to use them, and we will mentor your journalists and your editorial board. In fact, two of our finest journalists, Amhad Zein and Maryam Robin, will make themselves available to guide you through this process. And now over to you Ahmad!'

Ahmad Zein coughed a little to clear his throat. 'To run a successful newspaper,' he said. 'You must ensure its financial sustainability. Therefore, when it comes to allocating space within the paper, your first priority should be advertisements. To attract advertisers, you need to have readers, and to build your readership you have to find engaging stories such as unthinkable crimes or big scandals. For example, a headline that reads "Dog Bites Man" is not engaging, but "Man Bites Dog," that's a good news story! That's what sells. You also must have a comprehensive sports page.'

The Palestinians in the room started shifting uncomfortably in their seats. 'What about political analysis?' asked Zaki AlRadwan.

Ahmad Zein didn't appreciate the interruption. 'Political analysis and literary pieces are for whatever space remains,' he said. He then continued 'Religion belongs to the mosque, leave it there. Education belongs to the schools and the universities; it is not the business of the media. Art is the domain of literary journals and cultural centers. But make no mistake,

journalism requires profits to pay the salaries. Listen,' he said in a more sympathetic voice. 'You have no country to subsidise your press. You want your paper to be free from factional and political influences, then you need advertisements. That's how the free press generates salaries!'

Ahmad Zein's words were sobering. Inside Karim's head, there was one question simmering, 'What about Palestine?' The question was so persistent, it forced itself out. 'What about the cause?'

Zuhair ElRayes mumbled in classic Arabic an old proverb, 'Beware the wrath of those who don't share your predicament!'

Ahmad Zein snapped, 'Can you speak in Arabic so we can understand you!'

Zuhair switched to Egyptian dialect, 'It was nothing,' he said. 'Don't worry about it!'

When the meeting ended and the Egyptian delegation left the room, Zuhair ElRayes asked the Palestinians remaining to follow him into his office. Behind Zuhair's desk, sat a handsome young man, editing an article to be published in the first edition of *Akhbar Felesteen*. The young man greeted the incoming editorial board warmly and handed his desk back to Zuhair, who asked everyone to sit down and listen.

'So that's it!' Zuhair shook his head, 'Sensationalist journalism! We're supposed to write stories to tantalize, excite not educate and resist. So why do we even call it Palestine News, *Akhabar Felesteen,* if it is a tabloid for entertainment news and advertisements? What do you think Musa?'

Musa Saba was nominated to be in charge of Public Relations. He was a well-spoken, well-mannered young man, a leader of the Christian Youth Club and a friend to many of the factions in the area. 'The Amin brothers, Ali and Mustafa are trying to score political points with Nasser by pretending to care about Palestine,' he said. 'Our readers are mostly refugees. What advertisements can we run? You really think the refugees have anything to advertise or to sell? Or do you think we will run ads selling UN rations of flour and sugar?'

‘Just forget everything these new orientalists told you in that room.’ Zuhair was determined: ‘We will make this newspaper a home for nationalism, hope and resistance.’

‘What about our salaries?’ AlRadwan asked with a nervous laugh.

Zuhair responded with dramatic flair, ‘Your salaries will be the glory you will achieve, my dear resistance fighters’ Everyone laughed! ‘My apologies,’ Zuhair remembered. ‘I haven’t introduced my cousin, Nahedh ElRayes. He has just completed his law degree at Cairo University and has been appointed District Attorney in Gaza.’ Karim had heard about the mayor’s son and was curious to meet him. ‘He is a great poet, like you,’ Zuhair said to Karim. ‘He volunteered to edit our Art and Literature columns!’

On their way out of Zuhair’s office, Karim invited Nahedh for a drink of Seven-Up. The two sat on the wall of the newspaper building, their legs dangling over the wall, overlooking Omar Al-Mokhtar street. Watching the cars underneath speeding in both directions, Nahedh took one sip then said, ‘You must be desperate for a good listener! I accept your refreshing cold bribe. Go on! Recite your poetry.’

Karim laughed, ‘The bribe was not for you to listen to my poetry. The bribe was so I could listen to yours. You’ve just returned from Cairo, the beating heart of Arab culture and nationalism; I’m curious to hear what you have.’

Nahedh didn’t hesitate. ‘I will recite for you a poem I wrote for Ahmed Ben Bella and all the freedom fighters from the Liberation Front of Algeria who were kidnapped and imprisoned by France:

Do you yearn for the sea breeze at a café by the port?
And for the taste of Moroccan Green tea?
My sweet Gaza, do you not have a sea?
Do you not have passionate followers of Ben Bella
Send him some of your gentle breeze in his exile
Send him messages from Haifa
Where an old fisherman listening to the radio
Is raising his the palms toward Algeria in prayer:
Give me a ray of freedom
To light my path
Because the rays of the sun here no longer suffice

The sun here rises equally over Israel and the ones it has dispossessed
But you do not give of yourself to those who are not worthy’

Karim was moved to tears. He hadn’t heard poetry like this before, nor met anyone close to his age who had this depth of intellect, and generosity of spirit. The two young men stayed up all night trading poems on the wall and watching the cars below, until there were no more cars left in the street. 1963 was a year of new friendships, new promises and wider horizons.

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The editorial board of the *Akhbar Felesteen* newspaper, 1963. From left to right: Zuhair ElRayes, Musa Saba, Abdul Karim Sabawi, Darweesh Abdelnabi, Mohamad Zaki al-Radwan, Sa'ad AlDeen Alwelely, and Ahmad Agha. The other two seated and those standing behind them are part of the printing crew, their names were not found.

At the 1964 Arab Poetry Festival in Gaza photo showcasing some of the greatest writers in the Arab world. From left to right: Abdul Karim Sabawi, Musa Saba, Zuhair ElRayes, Anis Mansour, Mahmoud Hasan Ismael, Malak Abdel Azis, Abdel Rahman Sidqi, Salah Abdul Sabour, unkown, Alawady Alwakeel, Abdel Rahman ElSharqawy.

I go on searching in you … for you
In your eyes for your eyes
In your hands for your hands

Where is the one who filled me with the fire
Who resisted like a fortress
For thousands of years

All the cities are dragged
to the beds of their conquerors
Except you …You grow more defiant with the time

Abdul Karim Sabawi

(13)

SEEDS OF RESISTANCE: GAZA PALESTINE 1964

Moftiya gasped, wishing her eyes never witnessed such horror. There was her oldest grandson, the next patriarch in-line, primary breadwinner of the household, published writer and esteemed teacher, sitting on the floor, plastic tub between his legs, plucking a freshly slaughtered chicken. Khadija stood behind her giggling. 'You wanted to know what he would do if his wife gave him a son,' she said. 'Well, now you know!'

When Suhailah got pregnant with their third child, Karim wanted to be ready with a nutritious plan, so he went into the market and brought home a box full of little chicks, to grow in time for her birth. That was a smart move. Suhailah's labour was intense and the midwife became worried that she was losing too much blood, so Karim called the ambulance and whisked her off to the hospital. Two days later, she came home with a nine-and-a-half-pound baby boy, Hussein, named after his grandfather, the Sheik. The doctor who released her from the hospital told him that she needed to eat well, and fortunately Karim was ready, wasting no time following the doctor's orders.

'Don't you have something better to do?' Moftiya reproached him. 'Sitty,' Karim said in a tired voice that hadn't known sleep in days, 'if only you knew all the things I could be doing right now!'

It was true. Karim was spoiled for choice. Gaza in 1964, was a vibrant hub for politicians, diplomatic delegations, art festivals, revolutionary intellectuals and frontline resistance fighters. Being on the editorial board of the newspaper afforded him the opportunity to meet and exchange ideas and poetry with some of the greatest Palestinian minds at the time; Yousef Al Khatib, Ghassan Kanafani, Elias Sahab, Khairy Hammad and Abd al-Karim al-Karmy (Abu Salma), to mention but a few. His editor and boss Zuhair ElRayes gave him special attention, acting like a teacher and mentor. Karim listened intently to his every word – in the same way he did to his own father.

Karim rubbed the plucked chicken with flour, rinsed it in cold water, chopped it into pieces, threw it into a large pot with onions, mastic drops and cinnamon sticks, and he left it to

simmer on the stove. He checked on Suhailah; she was sleeping with baby Hussein in her arms. His youngest brother Nasser who was a few years old than Khulud was playing with her in the garden and Abir was being fed by Rahim. This was the perfect time for him to sit down with his father.

The Sheik loved those increasingly rare moments of quiet with his son. 'What are you reading now?' he asked while watching Karim drop fresh mint leaves into the tea cups.

'An Arabic translation of *The Road to Beersheba*, a novel Zuhair ElRayes gave me by the British author Ethel Mannin. It's the first English language novel to document the *al-Nakba*.'

The Sheik did not seem interested in hearing more about the novel. 'What else?' he asked.

'I'm also reading the work of Averroes ibn Rushd.' Karim handed his father the cup of tea and sat beside him.

The Sheik seemed more engaged. 'ibn Rushd is one of the most influential Muslim Philosophers of all time!' he exclaimed. 'But before you read his work, you have to read the theological writings of his predecessors, al-Ghazzali and Avicenna ibn Sina.'

'I have.' It didn't surprise Karim that his father was always a few steps ahead of him intellectually. 'It's a shame he was the last,' Karim said. 'We need more scholars like him to challenge the small mindedness of the current Sunni teachings.'

'This is precisely why they made sure he was the last,' the Sheik replied gravely. 'Authoritarian powers can only exist through the people's blind obedience. So, they hand us pre-packaged religious beliefs and make us so busy performing the rituals that we forget how to think for ourselves, and how to ask questions. So, tell me what have you learnt so far?' The Sheik used the same tone Karim often heard when he was a little student in his school.

'I will tell you, but don't use your stick if I get the answer wrong,' Karim joked. 'I have learnt that philosophy cannot be detached from religion. It needs to be an integral part of it.

The philosophical theology of ibn Rushd was a spark in the enlightenment of European minds. His translated work was crucial in the lead-up to the industrial revolution in Europe, and in building its democratic institutions; sadly, it was ignored within an Islamic world spiraling into ignorance and corruption.'

The Sheik listened to Karim and wondered if his son would soon be passing him by in knowledge. That thought made him exuberant with pride. Although Karim had missed out on higher education, his love for reading had turned him into a scholar to be reckoned with. The Sheik took a deep breath, and the aroma of Karim's chicken fueled his appetite. He smiled as he thought to himself, 'He is also a chef to be reckoned with!'

**

The night's breeze was warm and the sea waves gently embraced the shoreline. Beneath the silver haze of the bright full moon, a group of young men gathered in a circle on the sand intermittently clapping and cheering. At the center of the circle were Karim and Nahedh, locked into a poetic duel that lasted for hours, and would have continued into the next morning had it not been for their friend Musa Saba's intervention, 'Clearly, there will be no winners tonight,' he declared. 'You are both brilliant poets and you both hold in your hearts millions of poetic verses. But we all have wives to go home to.'

The men laughed and agreed that if they stayed any longer, their wives might come looking for them. One by one, they said their goodbyes and left. Musa, Nahedh and Karim walked slowly together toward the main street.

'Dr Haidar Abdel-Shafi returned from Jerusalem,' Musa said. 'I heard he is very excited about being part of the first Palestinian-only conference. He seems positive about the establishment of a Palestinian organization to represent us at both the diplomatic and the resistance fronts.'

'That's right,' Nahedh said. 'He visited my father when he came back. He said the organization will be named the Palestine Liberation Organization, and will open itself to membership from all political Palestinian factions everywhere.'

‘Dr Abdel-Shafi is a man to be trusted,’ Karim commented thoughtfully. ‘But I have an issue with Palestinianas trying to do two opposite things at the same time; we’re building the Palestinian Liberation Organization, so we can lead the resistance against Israel, while at the same time, we’re advocating for the idea of Pan Arabism and Nasserism, which in theory at least, means that the liberation of Palestine is the responsibility of the entire Arab World.’

‘It is possible to do both,’ Nahedh said in a hushed voice. ‘We are in no position to provoke the insecurities of the Arab leaders around us so we can’t oppose Nasser and his Pan-Arab rhetoric.’

‘Speaking of doing both, have you been following events in Beirut?’ Musa weighed in. ‘Constantin Zureiq at the American University of Beirut has mobilized Palestinian refugees who are students there. Even groups lead by George Habash have joined him. His movement is calling for a pan Arab revolution, and now has chapters in many Arab countries. They call themselves the Arab Nationalist Movement.’

‘Did they align themselves to Nasser?’ Karim asked.

‘Not all of them,’ Musa responded. ‘George Habash and Nayef Hawatmeh are already antagonizing Nasser with their Marxist rhetoric, while the rest within the movement are trying to gain his favor. It is creating deep fractures.’

Karim thought for a moment. ‘As long as we are organizing resistance from the outside, we will be subjected to division. Arab governments will tolerate Palestinian refugee movements like the Arab Nationalist Movement as long as it adopts the local political agendas. When a movement has so many chapters with opposing agendas, progress will be a huge challenge to say the least.’

‘Zureiq is dedicated to attracting the attention of the intellectual elite,’ Nahedh commented. ‘He believes the learned intellectuals will be the vanguards of a revolution of Arab consciousness calling for Arab unity and progressive modernity.’

‘Arab elites are not ready for his socialist secularist values.’ Karim realized with a start how much he was beginning to sound like his father. ‘How does he propose to convince our people to let go of their fundamental religious identity?’

‘He shouldn’t have to,’ Musa said. ‘Religion is in the heart. Our liberation cannot be exclusively aligned to one religion or another. Israel’s divide and conquer strategy along religious lines must never be a factor in our struggle.’

The three friends arrived at a fork in the road. ‘Well, this is where I bid you goodnight!’ Musa hugged his friends and walked toward the Christian sector.

Karim extended his arms out to Nahedh, ‘And this is where we part!’.

‘Not yet,’ Nahedh smiled cryptically. ‘I’m still going in the same direction as you.’

Karim realized that his friend was not going home. He was heading once again to the Sha’af farmlands that bordered the Tuffah district – either to conduct an operation against Israeli soldiers or to plan a new one. Nahedh was part of a growing underground resistance movement that employed guerrilla tactics against the Israeli army. He was an intellectual, a gentleman and a fierce fighter. Karim thought of the immense personal sacrifice Nahedh was making. He could be going home to his wife and his newborn son Monir. Instead, he abandoned the comfort of his bed and the benefits of his status as son of one of the most prominent and wealthy families in Gaza, to fight in the trenches, risking his life and freedom for the liberation of Palestine. Karim’s heart was stirred with admiration.

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The lobby of the newly opened Amal hotel in Gaza was buzzing with excitement as poets from all over the Arab world arrived and greeted one another. It was the eve of the seventh annual Arab Poetry Festival, initially meant to be held in Cairo, but under Nasser’s authority, moved to Gaza city as a gesture of solidarity with Palestine and its people. Karim stood in the lobby, in his best white shirt and casual black pants, impatiently waiting for his friend to arrive.

‘Of course, you’re already here!’ Musa shouted as he picked up his pace in Karim’s direction. ‘You’re lucky I waited for you,’ Karim smiled, ‘Zuhair is already here, with the most important guests. Let’s join them before the night is over!’

The two raced up the five flights of stairs to the rooftop of the hotel, and eagerly pulled two chairs into the large circle that had formed near the wall, overlooking the white sandy beach. ‘You’re just in time!’ Zuhair announced as he began introducing them to the guests. ‘Mr. Musa Saba is the head of our Public Relations at the newspaper, and Abdul Karim Sabawi is our editor of International News. He also happens to be one of our most gifted poets.’

‘Will you be presenting your poetry at this festival?’ Karim tried to maintain his calm as his mind danced in circles and his heart exploded with fireworks. The question had come from Salah Abdel Sabour, one of the greatest poets in the Arab World. Abdel Sabour’s first poetry collection, *an-Nas fi Biladi, People In My Land,* had signified the beginnings of the free verse movement in Egyptian poetry. Karim did not want to seem star-struck by the magnitude of the company he was with. ‘Yes,’ was his simple and short answer.

The conversation quickly moved with the rhythm of free verses and poetic articulation, reflecting the wit, diversity and intellect of those present. Amongst them were Yemen’s leading poets Ibrahim Alhadharany and Ali Ahmad Bakatheer, Egypt’s romantic poet Saleh Jawdat, Egypt’s contemporary poet Ahmed Abdel Muti Hijazi, Egyptian academic Dr. Abdel-Azzis al-Ahawany and Egyptian female poet Malak Abd al-Aziz, the only woman in the circle. Karim was deeply curious about Malak, and her profound sense of melancholy. Dressed in black, she exuded a sense of sadness and warmth that captivated him. When she excused herself to leave, Karim walked up to her, and gathering his courage, he invited her on a sightseeing tour of Gaza’s farmlands. ‘Don’t worry,’ he assured her. ‘We won’t be alone. I will ask my friend Nahedh ElRayes to join us.’ Malak accepted the invitation, picked up her handbag and walked out with incredible grace.

‘She hasn’t been the same since her husband passed away,’ Saleh Jawdat whispered to the men as they watched her leave.

With no more women in the circle, the conversation quickly descended into uncensored territories as the men shared wild stories of romantic adventures and traded improper jokes.

Waving his glass in the air, Alhadharany demanded their attention: ‘I met a woman in Cairo, who told me she was a poet,’ he blurted out in his Yemeni accent. ‘We went out for coffee, she listened to my poetry and I listened to hers. Afterwards, I took her to my room and we slept together. In the morning, I gave her ten Egyptian pounds.’

Saleh Jawdat was not one to miss an opportunity to score. He pointed at Abdul Muti Hijazi and Salah Abdel Saboor. ‘She must have been one of your contemporary poets,’ he joked. ‘Our poets in the classical genre would not have accepted less than 500.’

**

Malak, the attractive poet in her mid-forties, wearing black buttoned shirt and medium length black skirt, sat on a chair between Karim and Nahedh, under the shade of a large almond tree in Nahedh’s family farmland. The two young poets sparred for her attention, taking turns showcasing their finest poetic skills and their most refined sense of humor. At first, she seemed reserved, although she did listen intently and commented politely. But it didn’t take long for Malak to join in the fun, and to offer the younger poets her own verses and sharp comedic comebacks.

‘Thank you for bringing me here!’ Malak told them as she feasted on the green almonds that the two young men extracted from hard shells for her. ‘But, I’m curious, why did you invite me?’

‘To lift your mood!’ Karim quickly answered.

‘Oh! So it’s pity then?’ Malak smiled. ‘I’ll take it. I haven’t laughed this way in a long time!’

Karim’s answer might have been blunt, but it lacked a degree of honesty. Deep down, he was intrigued by the idea of a woman poet, a female intellectual, someone from the opposite sex, whom he could be drawn to at an intellectual realm – not to be frowned upon by his conservative society or his adoring wife.

‘Please forgive us if we transgressed any boundaries,’ Nahedh offered his apology. ‘We are young and inexperienced, and we were eager to practice our charm.’

Malak smiled light heartedly and the three began making their way back to the Poetry Festival.

‘Have you prepared your poem?’ Nahedh asked Karim as they got into the car. ‘Yes,’ Karim responded with a smile. ‘And it is not what anyone expects it to be.’

The expectation was that Karim’s poem would be in praise of Nasser, based on his history of Nasserism. But much to the surprise of all present, Karim delivered a poem that caught the Egyptian poets and authority figures in the room by surprise. The poem entitled ‘The Lost City,’ ended with rebuke for the Arab countries that had denied Palestinians the right to forge their own resistance – and that of course, included Egypt:

‘If you were mine
I would stand tall
But the collaborators have chained my hands
They took my guns… my weapons
They blocked the road to you
Enough! Enough!’

Judging from the loud applause in the room that followed, it was clear to Karim that he was not the only one who was starting to lose faith in Nasserism.

**

Abdul Muti Sabawi 1966

Epiphany

I know you own the world
The dagger
The whip
The hanging rope
The entourage
The Police men
The guards and dogs
I know your strength
Your army
Your horses
And your men
I know your shadow
When it falls on things
It destroys them
I know your eyes
And the betrayal between them
But …
I also know my heart
And I pity you!

Abdulkarim Sabawi

(14)

BROTHERS IN ARMS: PALESTINE EGYPT 1965 – 1967

Zuhair had just returned from a trip to Moscow, where he was part of a delegation representing the Lawyers' Arab Union. Jetlagged and unable to stop working, he ordered a team meeting in his office and a large pot of coffee.

'How was your trip?' His team at *Akhbar Felesteen* was eager to learn of his impressions as they greeted him and welcomed him back.

'Communism is a scam,' Zuhair grunted, falling into his black office leather chair. 'There is no enlightened left ready to lead us to a just and fair world. There is only a Tsar. Moscow is pouring money into everything military while ignoring and degrading civil society. The focus is on the arms industry not the people. I was reminded of the wise adage: The democratic-industrial countries, the First World, give you freedom and take away your bread. The Eastern bloc communist-socialist states, the Second World, give you bread and take away your freedom. As for us, the remaining three-quarters of the world's population, here in the third world, they've taken both our bread and our freedom.'

Zuhair looked around at the disappointed faces. 'Not what you wanted to hear… I know,' he said, shuffling the papers on his desk. 'But we need to have a clear understanding of how our world functions. Our focus must be on building our resistance on strong foundations with awareness and education. And on this note, here are your assignments for this week gentlemen. Now get to work!'

Zuhair handed the instructions to each one of his team members as they headed out the door. Handing Zaki and Karim their paperwork, he indicated to them to stay behind.

Zaki's face beamed as he read the paper Zuhair gave him. 'Moeen Bseisou has been released? This is wonderful news!' He looked at Karim who was equally delighted by his assignment. Karim looked back at him, 'Zaki *Beik*, you got Moeen Bseisou, and I got Ghassan Kanafani.'

Karim liked to use the somewhat outdated title *Beik* when addressing Zaki AlRadwan out of respect. *Beik* is a Turkish title for chieftain, traditionally applied to leaders and rulers of various areas during the Ottoman era. AlRadwan's family was bestowed with this title under the Turkish rule.

'We can all agree It's a great time to be in Gaza,' Zuhair smiled. 'Now let's get down to business.' He pulled out his cigarette box from his shirt pocket, took out a cigarette, and passed the box on to Karim and Zaki.

'Do any of you have a lighter?' Zuhair asked. 'The Russian Minister of Information kept admiring my Winston lighter, in the end I had no choice but to give it to him.' Karim offered Zuhair his lighter. 'It was more devastating for Manar, a female member of our delegation. She was forced to surrender her Max Factor lipstick to the Russian Minister's wife.'

The men laughed, and within seconds, the room was full of smoke. 'Now we can talk!' Zuhair smiled. 'First, Moeen Bseisou. He is one of our greatest poets and activists. As you know, he was jailed twice by the Egyptian authority for his communist views and for questioning their policies in Gaza, especially their role in keeping the Palestinians disarmed.'

'Yes, we will not die … but we will uproot death from our land,' Karim recited the last verse of Bseisou's famous poem, which had become popular amongst Palestinian prisoners. 'You'll have to be careful with this,' Karim said to Zaki. 'You want the story to get out, and to bring Moeen into our team, but without antagonizing the Egyptians to the point of shutting down our newspaper.'

'That's exactly right!' Zuhair agreed. 'Also, I've been told that he is a little depressed and feels that during his time in jail, that other poets have risen to take his place like Nizar Qabbani and Abdel Wahab Al-Bayaty.

'Don't worry,' Musa assured Zuhair. 'I don't need to mention other poets to him.'

As for you,' Zuhair turned to Karim, 'I need you to take a delegation from the newspaper to attend the elections of the first Union of Palestinian Writers and to cover as many of the conference highlights as possible. I saw Ghassan Kanafani this morning; he tells me he

will be spending some time in Gaza, not only for the election, but also for a book project he is working on, so be a good host.'

**

Karim and Suhailah sat every night on the edge of the wall that their families once built to keep them apart. This was now their spot. There, they enjoyed catching the cool evening breeze, and watching over the children playing in the garden below, while they swapped stories about the day's events. But of late, Karim had become more distant, and on this particular evening he seemed miles away.

'What are you thinking about?' Suhailah prodded reluctantly. She knew that at times Karim's silence indicated a process of either constructing or memorizing a poem. Being pulled away from that process made him extremely irritable. But this time Karim didn't seem to mind her question. 'I'm trying to figure out where I go from here. I need to do more,' he said, as his eyes filled up with tears watching Khulud running around the pomegranate tree, where he used to wait for Suhailah when they were children.

Although Suhailah had seen Karim fall into this mood before, she could never understand his deep desire for what he described as 'more.' 'More of what?' she whispered, almost hoping he would not hear her question. To be fair, it was not an honest question. It was more of a statement from a woman who had never wanted more.

'Never mind,' Karim said dismissively. 'Did I tell you I'll be meeting with Ghassan Kanafani tomorrow.'

'Who is Ghassan Kanafani?'

'He wrote the novel *Men in the Sun*. I think I left it on our bed so make sure Hussein doesn't rip it into pieces. If you find you have some time, read it.'

'What's the story about?' Suhailah asked half-heartedly. She knew she wasn't going to find the time to read. When would she? It took all her morning hours to wash and hang the dirty laundry and the endless amount of cloth diapers, all her afternoons to make food and feed

the children and all her evenings to bathe them and get them ready for bed while collecting folding and ironing the day's load. When would she find the time to read? Nonetheless, she humored Karim, 'Well? What's the story about?'

'Us. The story is about us.' Karim sighed. 'It's about three Palestinian refugees who pay a smuggler to drive them across the borders into Kuwait. The smuggler hides them inside an empty water tank attached to his lorry. At the final checkpoint, the smuggler gets distracted by an argument he has with one of the checkpoint guards. The argument lasts too long, meanwhile the men in the tank are getting cooked by the heat but decide to stay quiet in fear of being discovered. They suffocate and burn in silence.'

'How is this us?' Suhailah was deeply disturbed.

'Kanafani wanted us to look in the mirror. To see a reflection of our lives and the poor choices we are given.' Karim paused for a moment. 'Suhailah,' he said with determination, 'I would rather die making noise than suffocate in silence.'

**

Warriors of the Pen gathered at the Nasr Cinema hall in Gaza City for the first conference and elections for the Union of Palestinian Writers. Karim sat in the front row with his colleagues from the *Akhbar Felesteen* newspaper. He didn't pay much attention to the early speeches and the discussion regarding the mechanism and results of the election. He was only there to meet with and listen to the great Palestinian novelist Ghassan Kanafani. When Kanafani finally stepped up to the podium, instantly a curious silence hovered. Everyone held their breath, ready to listen.

The handsome young writer spoke with words made of fire. He was a seasoned fighter, activist, political organizer and poet all rolled into one. He highlighted the need for Palestinian resistance to be anchored in progressive values and to be part of wider global struggles for justice and freedom. He spoke about the writer's role in transcending borders, raising questions about the Arab governments' boycott of Palestinian writers who remained inside the 1948 borders on what became Israel. Finally, he introduced the works of a new poet, Mahmoud

Darwish: ‘Why should we censor the words of Darwish, just because he finds himself living under the entity of a country that was founded upon the ruins of Palestine?’ he asked.

After the speech, Karim invited Ghassan to a meal at the Sha’af farmlands to meet Nahedh and his band of fighters. Ghassan welcomed the idea, ‘I’d love to see Nahedh, he is one of our finest men. He has been growing fierce ...’ Ghassan intended to say resistance, but aware of the Egyptian officers nearby Karim quickly cut him off ‘…fierce oranges. He has been growing fierce oranges!’

**

The men cheered when Nahedh and his fellow fighter Abu-Talal emerged, carrying a huge tray of *Mansaf;* tender lamb pieces, served on a bed of rice soaked in yoghurt and topped with roasted nuts. The men placed the tray on the table and invited everyone to take a spoon and dive in. ‘Comrades,’ Nahedh announced, ‘we cannot resist on an empty stomach.’

Ghassan elbowed Karim, ‘Your friend is not growing fierce oranges, he is growing fierce bellies.’ The men laughed, complimenting their generous host while competing over the most tender pieces of lamb.

After the meal, the intellectual sparring and drinking began. Karim was feeling increasingly out of place even amongst his closest friends. They all subscribed to a Marxist socialist ideology, calling one another Comrades and swapping stories about commando units and operational guerrilla tactics.

‘I make the men in my commando unit read this before training.’ Nahedh pulled out an Arabic translation of *Guerrilla Warfare*, the military handbook written by the Marxist revolutionary Che Guevara.

Ghassan was delighted! ‘You actually translated it!’ He flicked through the pages of the book. ‘Astonishing! Well done.’ Ghassan handed the book to Karim who sat next to him. ‘What about you?’ he asked. ‘Do you have any field experience?’

Karim smiled, ‘I prefer to commit myself to *adab al-muqawama*, the resistance literature.’ Ghassan laughed, recognizing that Karim was quoting him.

Karim took a sip from his drink and decided to steer the conversation into more familiar territory. 'The Arab League will set up a unified military command called the United Arab Command, headed by Egyptian lieutenant general Ali Ali Amer.'

'To do what exactly?' Nahedh snapped. 'We have units, we have been training in guerrilla warfare. We've started launching successful operations against the enemy.'

'It is because of your increasingly successful operations that Egypt is feeling the heat,' Ghassan explained. 'And with that, it feels the need to co-opt you into its armed forces under the banner of the so-called United Arab Command. Think about it! Nasser discouraged Syrian and Palestinian guerrillas from provoking the Israelis, telling us again and again that he has no plans for war with Israel. But he knows that war is inevitable. Two thirds of our people are living in subhuman conditions in refugee camps outside the borders of their own country, while Jewish immigrants from Europe are living in their homes, sleeping in their beds, eating their food and bathing in their water. The refugees are mobilizing. Palestinians are demanding the right to armed resistance. This is the reality that Nasser needs to deal with.'

'Well, whatever happens, we have no choice but to work with him.' Nahedh spoke more calmly, considering his words with great care. 'Nasser has put Ahmad al-Shuqayri in charge of our armed units. Fatah and other factions have either joined or are close to joining al-Shuqayri's Palestine Liberation Organization. So, pragmatically speaking, if Nasser approves the idea of arming the PLO, and if al-Shuqayri is able to pull together an army of Palestinian fighters…'

'I would be the first to join.' Karim didn't process the words before they escaped from his mouth. But now that they were fired, there was no taking them back. History was being made, and Karim could no longer sit on the sidelines and watch.

**

Patriotic songs blasted the streets of Tuffah, and reverberated throughout Palestine and its neighbouring countries: '*Akhy Ja waz althalemoon al mada*, brother the oppressors have gone too far!' Abdelwahab's popular ballad articulated the mood of the nation. The call to arms

through music and popular culture carried the promise of freedom from Israel's tyranny and liberation of the homeland.

The hearts of the young and the old were pumping to the joyful rhythm of hope, as neighbours and friends gathered around dinner meals and coffee circles to bid farewell to their young men who enlisted in the al-Shuqayri army. The Sheik sat proudly next to his sons, Karim and Rahim, as guests from near and far poured into his home to say goodbye. The two brothers were departing on very different missions. Karim suspended his work both at the school and at the newspaper and willingly volunteered to join the al-Shuqayri army, while Rahim agreed to step up and to take on the responsibility of providing for the family, by accepting a lucrative administrative position at a hospital in Saudi Arabia.

The men's spirits were high as they spoke of the looming victory that Gamal Abdel Nasser promised in his passionate speeches. They believed that a Palestinian army under Egyptian command would be well trained and well equipped to fight alongside the Egyptians, and to finally lead the refugees back to their homes. They were certain that Palestine was just the last of a persistent wave of decolonisation that had swept the world. Repeated over and over again, in almost every conversation, was the belief that just as Algeria defeated the French, and gained its independence, so too would Palestine defeat Israel and gain its freedom.

The mood was different where the women gathered. There was no talk of a looming victory, only comforting words and prayers. In the Sheik's home, Khadija and Suhailah avoided looking at one another, afraid of opening the floodgates of tears, while Moftiya pretended she was going to bed early and stayed alone in her room. God forbid that anyone should see the strong old matriarch exhibit any signs of weakness. It was only yesterday she was waving her walking stick at Karim and Rahim and telling them not to bother her chickens. Now she was waving her walking stick at Karim's children and Karim was leaving and so was Rahim. Should she tell them her heart was breaking? What use would her words be and what could be gained from an old woman's fear of loss?

When the last guest finally left the Sheik's home and the evening came to a close, Khadija laid down next to him, and sobbed. 'Two sons are being ripped out of my heart,' she howled.

Holding back his own tears, the Sheik gently placed his hand on hers. ‘What good would it be to try to keep our boys at home in times like these?’ he whispered. ‘The enemy had already stolen two thirds of our homeland and now he stands at the gate coveting what remains. What kind of people would we be if we kept our sons at home?’

Across the garden, in Karim and Suhailah’s room, Karim was going through the nightly routine of forging space for his tired body on a bed full of children. First, he carried Khulud to her mattress, then Abir, but when he came back for Hussein, Suhailah stopped him. ‘He needs to sleep in our bed tonight. He’s a bit warm.’ Karim collapsed on the edge of the bed and kicked off his shoes. ‘So, it’s like this now?’ he mumbled.

In the unspoken language between husband and wife, keeping the child in bed was code for stay away and don’t think of touching me. Karim sighed deeply, ‘This is my last night. Don’t you want to say goodbye?’ Suhailah kept her silence as Karim tossed and turned in bed for a few more minutes. Finally, he exploded, ‘Come on! I know this is hard for you but…’ Suhailah cut him off, ‘You didn’t have to volunteer.’ Karim sat up and reached for her across the sleeping baby, ‘I thought you of all people, understood me. Suhailah, I need to be part of this. I can’t be a writer and hide from history. Maybe I will write something important and be the Thomas Paine of the Palestinian Liberation Army, inspiring change and boosting the morale of the fighters on the frontline. Or, maybe I won’t amount to anything. Who knows? No matter what, I need to try.’

Suhailah did not understand Karim, but she decided to surrender. She needed to surrender. She needed to be in his arms, and he was happy to oblige. He held on to her through the night, only letting her go when the rooster began to crow.

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After two months of training, Karim was allowed to return home to see his family. Karim’s steps were heavy as he walked down Mohatta street. His skin had grown darker, his eyes hallowed and his cheeks sunken. This was his first visit back home since he had been deployed. It didn’t take long before he was surrounded by well-wishers from his neighbourhood who formed a circle around him that grew larger until it resembled a celebratory march, accompanying him from the top of Mohatta street, right to the Sheik’s doorstep.

Moftiya and Khadija ululated as they hugged him, kissed him, and filled their lungs with his scent. The Sheik embraced the big man in uniform who was once a fragile small miracle. ‘Praise be to God for your return!’ he repeated as his heart soared to the seventh sky.

The initial greetings and pleasantries soon turned to questions about the army’s training, its capacity and strength. Karim’s brothers, Muti and Latif, took turns pouring coffee for the guests. The Sheik noticed how overwhelmed Karim seemed by the questions and the reception, so when Latif offered him a cup of coffee, he quickly intervened. ‘Don’t drink coffee now,’ the Sheik winked at Karim. ‘First, you go to your room and get some rest.’ Turning to his guests, the Sheik added, ‘Please excuse my son.’

Karim kissed his father’s hand, grateful for the rescue. At his bedroom door, he stood still, savouring the sight of Suhailah’s beauty. In the few moments she had since learning he was spotted walking along Mohatta street, Suhailah quickly washed, perfumed, put on make-up and was wearing Karim’s favourite dress. It would have been perfect, if baby Hussein hadn’t vomited on her shoulders as she handed him to Khadija, right before Karim walked in. But none of that really mattered. This had been the first time they had been apart since they were married seven years ago. No matter how Suhailah might have looked, or what she might have worn, she would still have been a glorious sight for his sore eyes.

Later in the evening, the entire family feasted over ripe pomegranates freshly picked from the tree in their garden. ‘Any news of Rahim?’ Karim asked. ‘Yes,’ the Sheik responded. ‘I received a letter from him. He is settling well in Khobar in Saudi Arabia. He sends everyone his love.’

Muti seemed agitated. ‘Brother,’ he spoke with determination. ‘Tell us about your experiences. I’ve been training with the Fatah guerrillas and they don’t seem to hold much hope for what the al-Shuqayri army is undertaking.’

Karim smiled. ‘Of course,’ he thought to himself. ‘It makes perfect sense for Muti to have joined Nahedh’s guerrilla style resistance.’ Muti was seventeen, and the Fatah movement was growing like wildfire in the refugee camps and beyond. ‘Sadly, they are right,’ Karim nodded in agreement. ‘Our militia is entirely outdated. It functions as if it exists in the past, in

the era of Mohamed Ali and Suliman Pasha.' Karim sliced a pomegranate into halves and began to remove the sweet red seeds into a glass bowl. 'It's not just reflected in the way they think and train, it's also in the outdated Ottoman titles they insist on using, the army General is *Büyük* general, a Major is *BinbaÅŸi* and so on.'

The Sheik shook his head sorrowfully, 'So this is the army that will liberate Palestine?'

Karim offered the bowl of pomegranate seeds he had prepared to Suhailah. She accepted it. 'Thank you!' she smiled. 'Now tell me, how did you pass the time there?'

'By walking in my father's shoes.'

The Sheik pointed at his feet laughing, 'I don't remember the last time I wore shoes Karim. I'm glad you found them and walked in them.'

'I meant to say that I did what my father used to do. I remember when I was a young boy, he used to summarize the news items for the men in the neighbourhood and then offer commentary on the events. So, to keep myself and others informed, every evening, after reading the newspapers I summarized the daily news for my fellow officers and tried to trigger intellectual discussions around them.'

'Do you have a rifle?' Young Nasser was keen to talk about what was most interesting to him.

'No. Most of our training focused on learning drill commands: forward march, attention, squad, salute and so on. But,' Karim added sarcastically, 'we almost got a marching band.'

This made Khadija very excited. 'A real marching band!' she exclaimed. The Sheik glared at her. 'I don't think a marching band in this context is a good thing Khadija. Let Karim tell us the story.'

Karim smiled bitterly as he began to tell the story. 'At a large meeting in Areesh, Egyptian army General Abdul Mohsen Mortaja asked the various battalions and smaller

militias to submit a list of their requirements. So, we prepared an ambitious list which included hand grenades, V2 rockets and even anti-aircraft guns. Our Egyptian commanding officer put the list in his pocket. When he finally spoke on our behalf, he told the General, "Sir, we know the importance of lifting the morale of our fighters and so we request the formation of a music marching band." The General was not impressed. He turned to the Governor of Sinai who stood next to him and said, "Mr. Governor. Why don't you just send them your marching band?" And that was the end of the story. No weapons and no marching band.'

'So, you have never fired a weapon?' His brother Razak seemed thoroughly disappointed. Razak and Nasser have already been telling tall tales to their friends and neighbours about their heroic big brother in the army with the rifle who was killing the enemies and liberating Palestine. Karim couldn't stand to see the disappointment in their eyes. 'I've been assigned an administrative position in Rafah, handling all the filing and paperwork for our unit.' Wanting to sprinkle some excitement on the boring placement, he added, 'now I get to ride on the train for free.' Razak and Nasser's eyes widened. For them, the train was a big slender beast that they could only dream about riding one day. Their brother's army service was starting to look good again.

Karim made a few more home visits during his army service. His administrative assignment in Rafah gave him authority to write permission slips and so he helped himself to a few, surprising Suhailah in the deep of the night and leaving her asleep before the break of dawn. If it weren't for her sudden feelings of morning sickness and the gradual swelling of her belly, Suhailah might have believed that Karim's visits were fragments of her sweet dreams.

But these night visits came to a stop when in the spring of 1967, Karim was pulled away from his office posting and thrust, along with countless others, into the Sinai desert. An irreversible chain of events had been triggered when Soviet intelligence informed Egypt that Israeli forces were building up near the Syrian borders. In an effort to deter Israel from invading Syria, Gamal Abdel Nasser ordered 130,000 troops into Sinai. Karim, and thousands of others in the al-Shuqayri army were handed rifles and given quick basic training in marksmanship. The drums of war were beating louder, and soon, the *Majnoon* would return to the sky. This time, Karim was hoping he would have the strength to confront and defeat him.

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The bare feet of hundreds of men, in white singlets and rolled-up olive drab pants, splashed into the cool waters of the Mediterranean. Blistered feet that ran in the heat looking for a war they could not find. Feet with soles burning from the scorching desert sand. Feet that were once in boots ready to march and fight for Palestine.

'How did we get here?' Karim asked the man standing next to him. 'We were looking for the Egyptian second line of defence,' the man replied, as he cupped his hands, and filled them with seawater, splashing his face and chest. Karim looked around them despairingly. 'We have become an army of white singlets and bare feet.' The man nodded in agreement. 'Fuck Lyndon Johnson,' he cursed as he walked away.

US president Lyndon Johnson handed Israel an easy victory. Days before, he had warned both the Egyptian-lead Arab forces and Israel not to be the first to strike. The Arabs stood down, and expected Israel would do the same. Instead, a well-equipped Israeli army launched a surprise pre-emptive strike, with 200 Israeli jets bombing 18 Egyptian airfields, destroying more than 80% of Egypt's air force before noon of the first day. This ambush ensured Israeli dominance in the sky, as Israeli ground troops pushed through with their tanks and artillery, expanding the borders of the Jewish state well beyond the boundaries of the 1948 armistice line.

Initially, Egypt kept news of its losses out of the public domain and announced victories in the front pages of its newspapers, in order to encourage its allied soldiers to put up a good fight. It was then that the al-Shuqayri militias were ordered to join the second Egyptian line of defense. They marched in the June heat into the Sinai desert, but all they could find were army boots scattered here, army helmets piled there, and endless desert sand. They walked for days, until they arrived at a small Egyptian city east of the Suez Canal. The people there laughed at them when they asked if anyone had seen the Egyptian second line of defense. It was not jovial laughter. It was a laughter loaded with sorrow and the bitterness of defeat.

They were told that they had marched through war crime scenes. That Israeli troops denied hundreds of captured Egyptian soldiers their rights under the Geneva conventions, killing them, as well as killing unarmed civilians, and burying their bodies in unmarked mass graves. Karim and the rest of the men finally understood why they had seen so many scattered

boots and helmets along the way. The men also learned that Gamal Abdel Nasser had resigned, and that not only was the rest of historic Palestine, Gaza, the West Bank and Jerusalem, fallen under Israeli occupation, but also the Syrian Golan Heights and the Sinai Peninsula. They realized that even the Egyptian land beneath their feet was now under Israeli control.

The defeat was devastating. The heat was stifling. The men stripped down to their singlets, took off their boots and began to walk along the coast back to Palestine. It didn't take long for the Israeli war planes to spot them. Drunk on victory, the pilots taunted them, swooping down so low that Karim felt the sting from the heat of the engines burn the hair on the back of his neck. Heads bowed down, the men dragged their feet, while the *Majnoon* danced in the sky above.

At night, the men veered inland to escape the taunting of the Israeli war planes. They were hungry, thirsty, and convinced it was just a matter of time before the Israelis killed and buried them in unmarked graves like their Egyptian brothers. From then on, they only walked at night and stayed out of sight during the day. They found sustenance in date trees and water wells along the way. When they were close to the Gaza Strip, they spread out, taking different routes to avoid attracting attention.

Karim walked alone through the date palm plantations on the outskirts of Khan Younis. There, he heard a familiar voice call out his name, 'Karim!' He stared through the veil of darkness, until he recognized the features of the man calling his name. It was Abu Talal, the fierce Bedouin fighter he often saw in the Sha'af fields training with Nahedh. Abu Talal was patrolling the area on the lookout for returned soldiers. 'You're alive!' he exclaimed. 'As alive as one can claim to be,' was Karim's sobering answer. 'Egypt is finished.' Karim handed Abu Talal his rifle.

'Utter nonsense!' Abu Talal quickly responded. 'This is the beginning my friend! We are just warming up.' He threw his arm around Karim, 'Let me take you somewhere safe so I can show you our renowned Bedouin hospitality!'

Karim followed Abu Talal to a nearby home where he was given generous amounts of food and a warm bed. The next morning, Abu Talal handed him civilian clothes. 'Put these on,

so you can go back to being a poet,' he laughed. 'Leave the armed resistance to us. I promise we will do our best.'

'Have you heard from Nahedh?' Karim asked before leaving.

Abu Talal's smile stretched his rugged face from ear to ear at the mention of Nahedh's name. 'Nahedh is doing fine. He is in Sinai setting up a new resistance front.'

Relieved, Karim thanked Abu Talal and began walking in civilian clothes in broad daylight – a poet eager to go home.

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Suhailah with the children, Khulud, Abir and Hussien. Gaza, Palestine 1966.

My beloved Suhailah,

Don’t tell me once more the stories of Sinbad.
Or the suffering of the prophets in times long passed.
Don’t say wait, be patient.
There is relief after hardship.
I can no longer tolerate the wait.
This journey was horror. Pain. Suicide.

My beloved,
I have returned but I did not come back.
This here is my wreckage and the wreckage of others.
So, don’t rub salt on my open wounds.
Don’t reproach me. It is too late and the time had passed.
Words will not change us.
We have lost.
We are torn on this earth.
We are shattered pieces.
Those of us not slain by the sword
Are dead by any other means.

Abdel Karim Sabawi June 1967

(15)

CACTUS: PALESTINE 1967

Karim and Latif paced up and down the hospital corridor, pausing momentarily every time they passed by the window to check if the Israeli jeeps were still parked outside. ‘The dogs have been stationed here since we arrived.’ Karim finally snapped.

Since his return from the war, Karim had been looking over his shoulder as he played an intense game of cat and mouse with the Israelis. The Occupation forces were detaining those suspected of serving with al-Shuqayri and were coercing them into exile. Already, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank had been forced to flee their homes to new UN camps set up in neighbouring countries to absorb them.

With the newspaper shut and Suhailah nearing her due date, Karim tried to make good use of what little time he had left before the Israelis came for him. So, when Monir ElRayes called for a meeting of intellectuals and fighters to discuss what to do next, Karim did not hesitate to join them. He believed this was a historic moment in time. He believed his ideas of non-violent resistance would trigger the beginning of Israel’s end. He addressed the room with a short speech explaining the importance of adopting Mahatma Gandhi’s *Satyagraha*. ‘Let us be brave,’ he told them. ‘Let us hold on to our truth. Stand up against the violence of the occupier by employing civil disobedience, strikes and non-violent protests. Our enemy is powerful with weapons. Whereas we are powerful with our truth.’ Maybe it was too soon for Karim to speak of non-violence. The mood in the room was not supportive of what they viewed was the passionate idealism of a young intellectual.

‘Come on Suhailah!’ Karim’s nervous voice echoed in the sterile hospital corridor. ‘Come on! Push this baby out before they take me.’

‘They’re not here for you,’ Latif assured him. ‘If they were, they would have arrested you hours ago.’

Karim sighed. ‘I think you might be right,’ he told his younger brother. ‘Maybe this is to do with Muti. They are hoping he’ll come here to see the baby. They’re just using us as bait.’

‘Well, you have to admit our brother is pure genius,’ Latif smiled. ‘I mean he gathered tens of rifles and ammunition left over from the al-Shuqayri army and transported them to the *fedayeen* fighters in *Molokhya* vegetable crates!’

Karim laughed, ‘I can’t believe he passed many times right under the nose of the Israeli soldiers, singing Abdelhalim Hafez songs to drown the sound of rifles rattling beneath the *Molokhya* leaves!’

**

While Karim and Latif continued to pace the corridors of the hospital, Muti was meeting with the man who would soon become the face of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Yasser Arafat, founder of the Fatah movement, handpicked the men he worked with, and Muti had come high on his radar. The two had travelled through Israeli security checks with fake documents to meet in a public café in Jerusalem, one that was frequented by Israeli soldiers. Muti learnt in his guerrilla training how planting himself in a place where he was not expected to be could sometimes render him invisible.

The two fighters casually watched the well-armed Israeli soldiers stroll the streets of the old city. ‘What’s the point of victory, if you’re going to spend your life hiding behind a bullet proof vest?’ Muti wondered out loud.

Yasser laughed, ‘That’s why I wanted us to meet here. I wanted you to see this. Look,’ he said pointing at a souvenir shop across from the café. ‘You see the man over there selling the olive wood crosses? His family has been selling theses crosses since Christ was crucified, and they will still be selling olive crosses for centuries to come. Does he look afraid?’

Muti looked at the man, ‘No. He looks content. He’s not afraid.’

‘Now compare him to these young well-armed Israeli soldiers who supposedly just won the war.’ Muti examined the faces of the soldiers. ‘They are nervous. Their fingers are on the trigger. They are shit scared. You know why?’

Muti thought for a moment. The answer was easy. ‘It’s because they know that the real war has only just begun.’

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The doctor stepped out of the labour room to make a short announcement; ‘Congratulations! It’s a girl.’

‘Another girl!’ Latif laughed, ‘*Sitty* Moftiya is not going to be impressed.’ Karim glared at his brother, before he stepped into the labour room. If he was disappointed to have another baby girl, he certainly did not show it. He welcomed the arrival of his fourth child and third daughter, a tiny dark bundle of bliss that rested in his wife’s white arms.

‘My love,’ Karim kissed Suhailah. ‘*Alhamdolelah*, thank God! Finally, you have given me a child that has my colour.’

Karim picked up the baby in his arms. ‘Baby girl! What a time for you to be born!’ he whispered in her tiny ear.

‘What are we going to name her?’ Suhailah’s exhausted voice carried more than the question she asked. It carried deep anxieties about the future. She knew it was a matter of time before Karim had to run. She had been preparing herself for his departure. ‘Give her a name before you…’ she couldn’t finish the sentence.

Karim pressed his lips gently on the baby’s cheeks. He thought of a popular song he had heard playing on the radio that morning. The song was titled *Samah*, meaning forgiveness. He sang as he gently rocked the baby; ‘*Asl al samah taba almilah ya bakht meen samah*’ - the essence of forgiveness is the virtue of good people, lucky are those who forgive.’ Karim smiled, having found the perfect name. ‘We will call her Samah!’

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Two weeks later, Karim sat down with his father to figure out what to do. Panic had spread as Israelis began conducting house to house searches, issuing anyone suspected of being

part of the resistance an ultimatum: Leave now and you will be spared, or stay and you'll be jailed indefinitely.

'Everyone in Gaza is part of the resistance,' Karim despaired.

The Sheik conceded, 'Yes, and they would love for everyone to leave. Did you talk to Monir ElRayes about your options?'

Karim appeared crushed under the weight of the words he was about to utter. 'He told me I must leave and promised he would be sending money to my family while I'm away.'

'How long did he tell you to stay away?'

'He is convinced that it would not be for long. The Israelis are facing international pressure to withdraw.' Karim paused for a moment before he added with a bitter smile, 'I called Zuhair this morning, he's been hiding in Nablus. He also told me to go, but not to commit to any long-term work in Amman because he will need me back at the newspaper as soon as the Israelis withdraw.'

Khadija stormed into the room, determined and resolute. 'You must go!' she commanded him. Karim's eyes searched her face; he wanted to memorize forever the strength she embodied in that horrific moment as she stood on the edge of eternal loss.

'Go now!' she yelled at him, lifting him up with the strength of a thousand mothers. Karim was suddenly a young boy in first grade, drowning in the flood currents when she lifted him and carried him all the way home. 'Leave. They're almost here. *Yallah*.' She literally threw him outside into the garden. Where did Khadija find the strength to lift her grown son and push him out? Did she spend the rest of her life wondering whether she would have done that, had she known he would be gone forever?

Suhailah ran into the garden, surrounded by the children, but neither one of them remembered saying goodbye. Suhailah only remembered having a rib torn out of her chest and a sudden emptiness where her heart was once beating.

The soldiers entered the Sheik's home as Karim jumped over the cactus hedge and into exile.

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EPILOGUE

WHO IS GEORGE? AUSTRALIA 2018

'Yes!!!' I cheered as I pulled into the only disabled spot left outside the shopping centre on a warm Queensland morning. 'Now what?' I asked as I turned off the car engine. It was the first time I had accompanied my father on his daily trip to the mall since he retired in Queensland ten years ago. 'Baba, now what?' I asked again, knowing how important it had become for him to do things in the exact same manner every day.

I stared at his face while I waited for an answer. His face was strong and gentle, a rugged terrain of countless tear tracks and glorious laugh lines. His eyes were a thousand and one stories in a glance. His lips were always moving to the rhythm of a poem he quietly whispered like a sacred prayer. He was somewhere else. He was always somewhere else.

'Baba?' I tugged at his attention apologetically, knowing that for him, the world outside his brilliant mind often seemed like nothing more than a series of constant and unwelcomed interruptions. 'Baba?' I called again, this time more assertively. He looked at me, exasperated. I hate doing this to him. I hate dragging him away from his poems and memories.

'Get a big trolley so I can lean on it,' he finally responded.

'But baba, your walker is much better. It's in the boot.'

'Walker?' he faked outrage. 'Do you want my friends to think I'm an old man?' he half-joked.

As we walked into the mall, I watched him lean on his shopping trolley, slowly shuffling his feet, proudly holding the weight of his body as straight as he could. At seventy-six years, my father's physical fitness was waning, but the sharpness of his mind was, as always, extraordinary. 'Baba,' I teased him, 'You were right. This trolley is making you look at least twenty years younger.' He laughed, appreciating the humour.

We headed toward his favourite spot at the café, and I was blown away by the

reception. ‘Good morning George!’ a young Māori woman in the mall’s security uniform greeted him.

‘Lovely day George!’ shouted the hipster Caucasian man with a beautifully groomed beard standing outside the barber shop.

‘George, I took your advice and sprinkled sumac on my fish,’ a vivacious blond woman in her sixties flirted. ‘Next time come over and I’ll cook it for you.’

My father laughed wholeheartedly. ‘Sure,’ he said, using his most charming broken English. ‘But promise, you will not take advantage of me. I am a married man.’

The woman giggled pleasurably as she strutted away.

At the café, an elderly couple wearing matching white shirts and Nike runners were excited to see him. ‘George! We held your table for you.’ They got up and moved the chairs out of his trolley’s path, handing over his favorite table at the café before waving goodbye.

As he sat down, he sheepishly looked at my bemused expression. ‘I’m the most important person here,’ he said. ‘Everyone knows me!’

‘Really?’ I couldn’t help but laugh. ‘Clearly they don’t have a clue. Who the hell is George?’

‘When I started coming here, the waiter couldn’t remember my name,’ my father explained. ‘She said Abdul Karim was too hard, so she called me George instead. Now everyone calls me George.’

I held back my tears. I’m sitting across the table from one of the greatest minds I’ve known. My teacher. My father. Gaza’s most celebrated poet and winner of countless awards, and all others see in him is an old man with broken English and a name not worth remembering.

After we drank our coffee, my father pushed his trolley to the grocery store. ‘Pomegranates are in season,’ he announced with excitement, ‘I want to prepare a bowl of pomegranate seeds with rose water for Suhailah. She has been craving them.’

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AUTHOR'S NOTE[3]

When my father jumped over the cactus hedge, he believed he had no choice but to leave and that his absence from Gaza would be temporary, until Israel complied with the international pressure for it to withdraw. But, at the Jordan river crossing, the Israeli soldiers forced him at gunpoint to sign a document giving up his right to residency in his homeland, forever. It was at that moment that my father understood that Israel had no intention of leaving.

This was the photo we took to obtain a travel I.D, so we can follow my father into exile. I am a baby, cradled in my mother's' arms, my three siblings, Khulud, Abir and Hussien standing around us. My first baby photo is the last family photo we took in our homeland.

In Jordan, we rented a room in a house that belonged to a family of 1948 Palestinian refugees in an unregistered camp called Khnefsah. Two years later, we managed to leave the camp and headed to Saudi Arabia, where we shared a small house in Dammam city with my uncle Abdul Rahim, his wife and children. Growing up in Saudi Arabia, I heard so much about Palestine, and often wondered what the smell of jasmine was like. What does a pomegranate tree look

3 Excerpts from Author's Note were previously published in a feature story on Aljazeera (Sabawi, 2017).

like? How can there be a fruit tree growing in someone's backyard? All we had in Dammam was desert sand and high walls surrounding our home. Outside, the streets were hostile and dangerous to little girls and boys, and so we always felt afraid and out of place.

In 1973, my father's application for a 'visitor' permit to go home was approved. We sailed across the desert in his Chevrolet sedan, which he named the Desert Ship. At the Jordan crossing, we joined the line of Palestinians who were permitted to temporarily 'visit' their own homeland. The Israelis separated the men and boys from the women and girls and an Israeli female soldier asked us all to strip down to our underwear. A sense of shame washed over me combined with my embarrassment for my mother and older sisters. I couldn't understand what the soldier was hoping to find beneath our dresses. I didn't make eye contact with anyone for a few hours after that. We drove from the crossing to Gaza in silence.

We were greeted at the Sheik's home with the fragrant smell of jasmine. At last, I could match the stories I grew up with about Palestine, with the reality of experiencing the homeland. I lost myself into the loving embrace of *sitty* Moftiya, *sitty* Khadija and *sido* the Sheik.

We spent a few weeks in Gaza. I got to learn how to climb on the almond trees in my grandfather's house and how to crack the hard almond shells to eat the nut on the inside. I learned to stay away from the cactus hedges and have my mother or father peel the fruit for me. I learned how to surrender my cheeks to the endless kisses and pinches of countless relatives. I learnt how to walk past the lizards on the wall without flinching. I loved that I could understand the words spoken in the street – unlike in Saudi where my ears hadn't yet gotten used to the Saudi dialect. I learned to feel safe in the embrace of older women and I learned their names. On this trip, I learned what it was like to be home.

When we returned to Saudi, I was getting ready to start my first year of school and my father was trying to find a university for my oldest sister Khulud to attend. The only university that would accept her, a Palestinian refugee, was in Lebanon.

My father travelled to Lebanon a few times to check out the university, and to catch up with his brother Abdul Muti who was leading training and tactical operations for the Palestine Liberation Organization. There he met with Fatah leaders, Palestinian fighters, poets and intellectuals, and he grew critical of Yasser Arafat's lack of appreciation for artist and culture.

Despite being courted by various factions, my father maintained his independence. This photo was taken on one of his visits to Lebanon, with his brother Abdul Muti on the left and Yasser Arafat in the middle, just before the Lebanese civil war began.

We lived in Saudi Arabia for ten years. We covered ourselves in the black *Abbaya* and covered our hair under the black veils so we could go to school. Our family continued to be poor until the later half of the 70s, when my father and his brother Abdul Rahim had began a business that eventually became a multi-million dollar success.

With the civil war raging in Lebanon, and no universities open for us in Saudi Arabia, my father applied for immigration to Australia as an investor. He would always joke that the real investment he was making was his daughters, he wanted us to reach the highest levels of education. After considering the various cities in Australia, my father chose Melbourne for its multicultural and aesthetic advantage. By the time we immigrated to Australia, our family had grown, and I was one seven; four daughters and three sons.

In 1980 we stepped off the plane at Tullamarine airport in Melbourne. I felt as though my eyes would pop out of my head as I tried, in vain, to contain the vibrancy of the green fields that surrounded us. Australia was unlike anything I had ever seen.

We drove through the streets of Melbourne. Almost every neighbourhood had a playground with grass fields, swings, slides and picnic tables. The idea that these were shared public spaces that anyone could use for free was an exciting new concept. In Saudi Arabia, playgrounds were either part of gated communities and company residential compounds or were inside the walls

of privately-owned mansions.

My father bought a house on a farm on the rolling hills of the Dandenong Ranges in Victoria. He started exporting Australian lamb to Saudi Arabia, where he owned a meat processing factory specializing in fast food, American style hamburgers and hotdogs. But when he wasn't tending to his business or his farm, he was writing novels and poems about his homeland.
We worked hard on the farm, chasing runaway cows back into paddocks, mending fences and herding livestock to greener pastures. It was all a very new and exciting world! We wanted to belong to it.

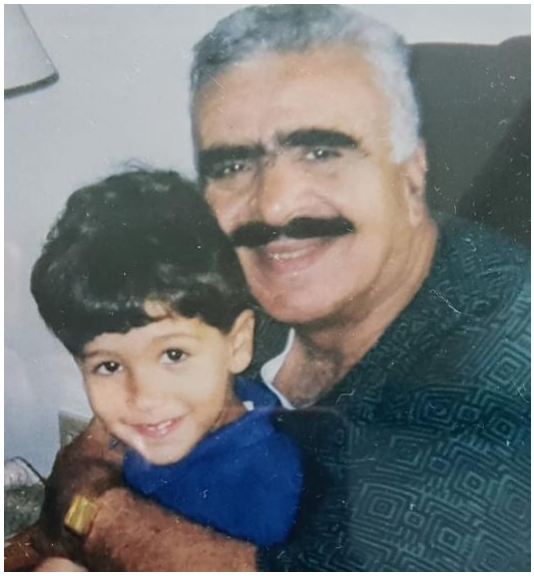
The first few years in Australia were dedicated to learning the language, making new friends and understanding our new hybrid identity. Now we were part of the hyphenated Palestinians who were spread out across the globe.

In 1982, the civil war in Lebanon had reached its peak. Our grief-stricken parents watched in horror as news of massacres in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Lebanon travelled across the airwaves, reminding the world of the injustices Palestinians continued to endure. My parents were especially concerned for the safety of my uncle Abdul Muti, and for my father's friend Nahedh ElRayes, who was also a high-ranking leader in Fatah.

For the first time I saw images of Palestinian corpses splashed on the covers of newspapers. Melbourne's newspaper *The Age* ran an op-ed by an Israeli supporter expressing outrage not at the perpetrators of the massacre, but at all the coverage it was receiving. The op-ed asked whether Palestinians would get so much attention if they didn't have oil instead of blood running through their veins. The implication was that Palestinians were Arabs and, by association, like Arabs have oil and big money. I found myself writing a response. To my surprise my response was published. I was 14 years old and I had just discovered my voice and the power of the written word. It was then that I began my lifelong dedication of advocating for truth and justice for the Palestinian people.

In 1989, on a trip to Egypt, I met Monir, the son of Nahedh ElRayes, my father's life-long friend. It felt like the world had finally come full circle and I was face to face with my history and my future. It was love at first sight. Monir and I were married almost instantly, and we never looked back. We have three children; below is a treasured photo of my oldest son Nahedh

and his legendary grandfather, Nahedh ElRayes. The young Nahedh and the old Nahedh's lives could not be more different, especially given that my son Nahedh was born in Canada and is now living in Australia, a Canadian-Australian citizen, yet they will always be tied to the collective history of our people.



When the Oslo peace accords were signed in 1993, the PLO began a process of establishing the Palestinian Authority, and members of the PLO began their return. My uncle Abdul Muti and my father-in-law Nahedh ElRayes were amongst those who went back to Gaza. My father followed. In 1996 and for the first time, my father and all his brothers including Abdul Muti, were united along with all their families, children and grandchildren. The Sheik, Khadija and Moftiya did not live long enough to witness this magnificent reunion.

During that time, my father began to build his dream project on the land he bought decades earlier, before his exile, *Mashrou Ammer*. He poured all of his life savings into building al-Nawras, a cultural centre, complete with a large amphitheatre, a reception hall, conference rooms, an Olympic size swimming pool and a pool side café.

For a few years, my father enjoyed the company of his best friend Nahedh and his brother Abdul Muti as hope of a liberated Palestine lived again. This here is a photo of the three men delivering a panel on armed and intellectual resistance in Gaza in 1998.

But by the year 2000, entering into Gaza became very restrictive and the peace process began its slow death. A second intifada erupted and my uncle Brigadier General Abed al-Muti al-Sabawi was killed in Gaza while trying to diffuse an Israeli bomb. My father-in-law, former Justice Minister and Independent Legislator Nahedh ElRayes died of cancer in 2009. The funerals of both national heroes were attended by tens of thousands in Gaza city. My father was not allowed into Gaza for either funeral.

In 2006, Gaza fell under harsher Israeli siege, the peace process ended. My father's dream cultural centre was bombed a few times in 2008 and again in 2010. Eventually, it was sold for next to nothing. My parents, both now in their 70s, live in Redland Bay in Queensland.

CODA

I am generation *al-Naksa*, born in the year of relapse and defeat. Born in the year of lost hopes and dreams. I am the age of exile. My birthdays are a painful reminder of the number of years since we were uprooted. Did I write my father's story to reverse the clock? Maybe. My grandparents in Gaza often joked that I took my parents away from them. How can a baby bring such misfortune? Is this my atonement? This research has allowed me to finally take my father home. Together, we traversed the tracks of memory, and with these written words I have reconstructed his beloved city Gaza in all its brilliance and glory before the occupation; the streets of Tuffah, Bab al-Roum, the mosque of Said Hashem on Eid, the Sacred Fire on the eve of Easter at the Church of Saint Prophyrius, the Sufi festival of miracles, the old bazaar, the shoe mender, the barbar, the Shiek's school, the shrine of Abualazzem, the cedra tree, Gaza beach, the Al Samer cinema, Omar Al-Mokhtar Street, *Akhbar Felesteen* newspaper, the farm fields and the aroma of a thousand and one pots cooking in Mohatta street. In writing his story, I have taken him back to a time when Gaza was a cultural and commercial hub. For the last three years, I have taken my father home. Am I forgiven?

A Palestinian souvenir with a common phrase often written on walls in Palestine and in refugee camps. The cartoon in the image depicts Handala, a refugee child waiting to return. Handala was created by the late Palestinian political cartoonist, Naji Al-Ali who was assassinated in London in the 1980s.

CONCLUSION

I have situated this thesis within a growing field of 'decolonised' research by writers from indigenous and marginalised backgrounds who aim to 'interrupt and interrogate' traditional and past colonial structures (Tuhawai Smith, 2012). I have illustrated why this is especially crucial in exploring the Palestinian experience, and how my methodology, which relies on first hand oral testimony, poetry and storytelling, builds on and goes beyond critical theoretical frameworks and conceptions, illustrating the ways in which these research tools capture and relay experiences that are not easily numerated or standardised. Through navigating the memories and lived experiences of two Palestinian-Australian writers – myself and my father – I have explored the transgenerational ways through which the traumas of exile, erasure and dispossession, and their manifestation, are a key to understanding the Palestinian-Australian identity.

I have illustrated the ways through which trauma and exile, the diasporic condition of estrangement and alienation (Said, 2001) can be passed on from one Palestinian generation to the next through postmemory. I have argued that while Hirsch's postmemory theory focuses on the transmission of trauma to second and third generation Holocaust survivors who may not have experienced the trauma firsthand (Hirsch, 2012), her postmemory theories can readily be applied to Palestinian survivors of *al-Nakba*, war and dispossession, and their second and third generation descendants. I have also made the case that for the postmemory generation of Palestinians, memory of the past is not only reconstructed through objects, but also through the absence of objects and places that have been either denied or systematically erased.

I have used creative writing as a means to counter this denial and systematic erasure. By writing the story of my family within the blank spaces of erasure, I have contributed new knowledge, never before recorded or written, such as the story of the flight of the people of Tuffah during the 1948 bombardment of the Gaza strip and details of how they survived for nine months in the unregistered refugee camp they set up in Tel Zo'reb. This story would have been lost if not for the oral testimony collected from my father and other family members who lived through that experience. In fact, the creative project not only allowed me to record the history of the people in Gaza, and Palestine in general, through the eyes of the poet and idealist Karim, but it also gave me, as a writer, the opportunity to fill in the blank spaces erased by time; for

example, the lush green Gaza of 1948 is nothing like the concrete and rubble of the Gaza that we know today.

The creative work also set out to disrupt a colonial misrepresentation of how Palestinians lived prior to and in the aftermath of the 1948 establishment of Israel, by offering an authentic representation of their daily lives and struggles, and the political events and factions that still dominate the discourse. I referenced Edward Said's Orientalism theory (Said, 1978) regarding the objectifying and stereotypical representation of people in the 'East' by those in the 'West', in order to explain not only why, but also how the Palestinian people were subjected to misrepresentation and were made invisible by Western academic, cultural, literary and photographic records of Palestine prior to 1948 (Nassar, 2003). I drew on the works Nur Masalha (2012), Rosemary Sayigh (2013) and others to make the connection between the rendering of Palestinians invisible, and the absence of *al-Nakba*, the Palestinian experience of ethnic cleansing and dispossession, from the 'trauma genre' (Sayigh, 2013).

In placing myself autoethnographically within the research as both subject and researcher, I reflected on my Palestinian-Australian identity, drawing on my personal experience and that of others within the Palestinian-Australian community, in order to explore the representation of Palestinian people and issues in Australian media, as well as the representation of Palestinian voices within Australian mainstream media networks. Doing so allowed me to offer reflexive critical, evocative, cultural and theoretical analyses that may be out of reach or too complex to articulate from the outside looking in.

I am proud of my Palestinian identity. But that is not all that I am. Reducing identity to singular affiliation not only leads to xenophobia and fanaticism (Maalouf, 2000), but it also becomes a tool for 'Othering', placing us only on the Palestinian side of the hyphenated identity, while denying us our Australian one. Once trapped into one side of the hyphen, we can be excluded from what is considered to be the boundaries of Australia's 'moral communities' (Moris, 1996). Our narrative, our suffering, our stories become marginalised. The exclusion and negation of our voice and identity nourishes our obsession with Palestine, leaving us consumed with the idea of 'gaining or reclaiming a Palestinian identity' (Cox and Connell, 2003, p. 340).

Building on this, I have looked inward to try to understand my Palestinian-Australian identity, introducing the term ‘inhabitation’ to describe the myriad of ways in which I feel we are inhabited by the idea of Palestine, while shedding light on the complex ways in which our Palestinian identity in exile is nurtured and driven by a homeland that inhabits our hearts and minds and which finds expression in our words and our art.

I am emotionally inhabited by a homeland I have been barred from geographically inhabiting. I am a recipient of trauma I never personally experienced. I am part of a generation born and raised in exile. We are the ‘guardians’ of Palestine.

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