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# Arak and Other Stories

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# ARAK AND OTHER STORIES

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Dean of the Graduate School

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2017

*For Temple June*

# ARAK AND OTHER STORIES

by

FATIMA SAUSAN MASOUD, B.A.

THESIS

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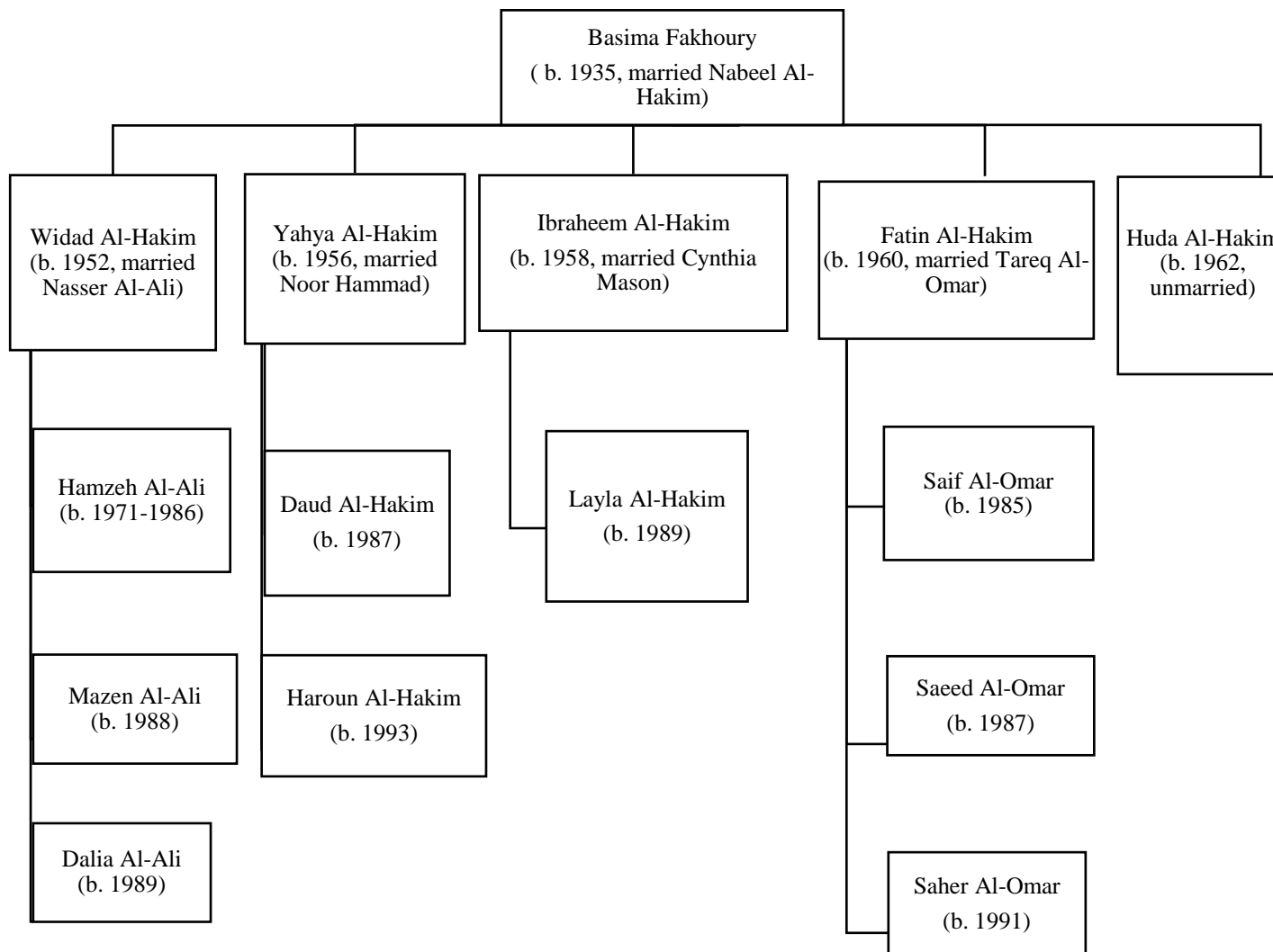
You are my reason for living. I love you all.

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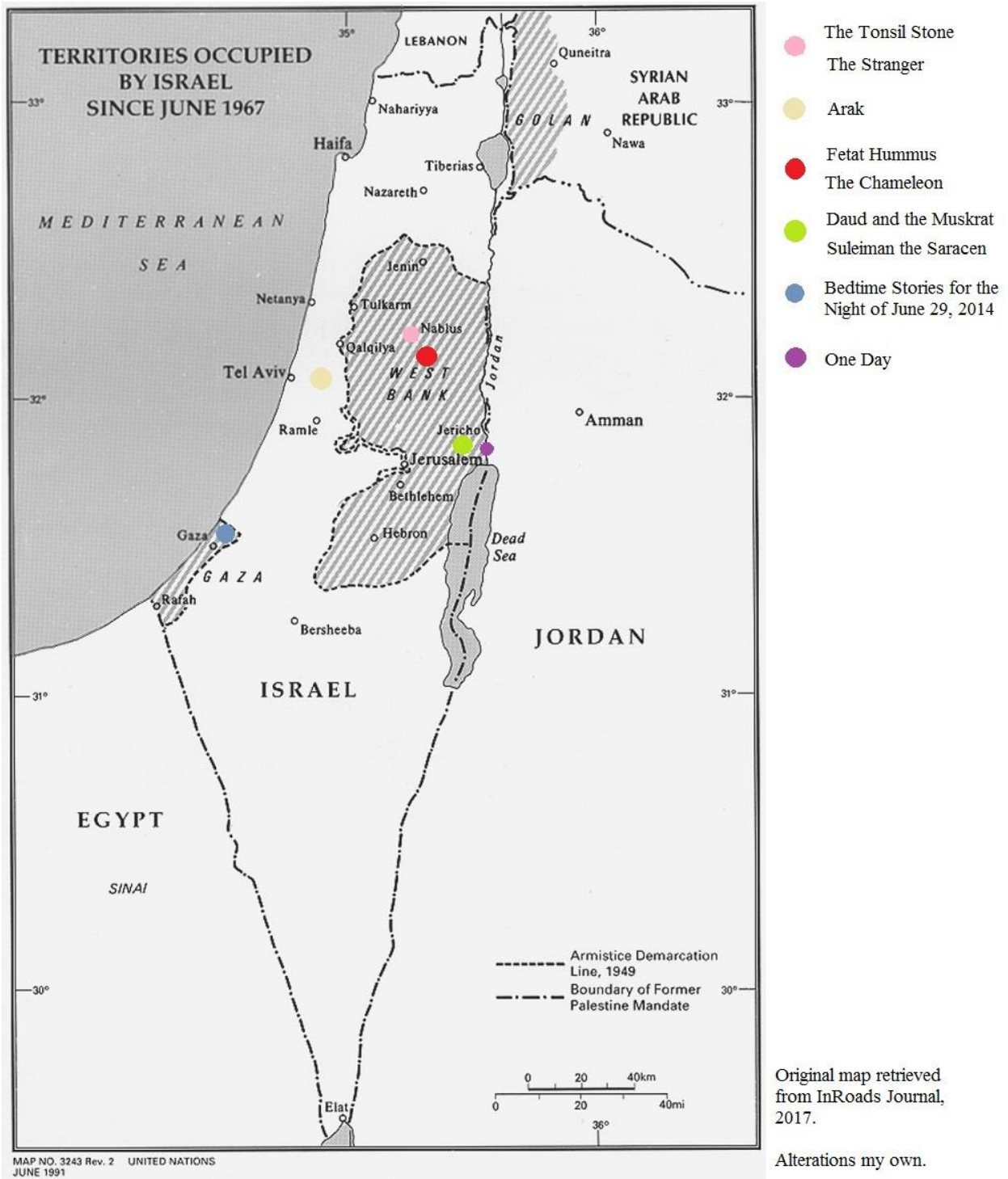
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## Al-Hakim Family Tree





## Geographical Map of Stories



## Preface

When I began writing *Arak and Other Stories*, I had only one major concern: I did not want to write about politics. Like many Arab-Americans living in the United States post-9/11, I often defer political discussion in favor of less polarizing conversation. As Gregory Orfalea points out in his book *The Arab-Americans: A History*, discussion of Palestine is often criticized when it gets to be “too political.” This is what spurred my initial idea to explore, through stories, the daily lives of Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza. I discovered, however, that it is next to impossible to discuss Palestinian daily life without getting “too political.” Political discussion rules the conversations among Palestinians: the unwanted guest at the dinner table, the coffee shop, the bedroom. Politics, as poet and novelist Mourid Barghouti, writes, “is nothing and it is everything” (44).

Although I abandoned the naïve attempt to write Palestinian stories divorced from politics, I still had many questions: How could I discuss Palestinian daily life, politics, and Israeli relations while living in the United States? As a Palestinian-American, how could I avoid feeling like an imposter while writing about times and places that I only barely remember? How can I write fiction and still communicate the realities of daily life for Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza? Why do these stories *need* to exist? These questions, and many others, guided me throughout the writing process of this collection. I don’t believe I’ve answered them fully – I doubt they’ll ever be fully “closed” or neatly answered – but I do believe these stories make an earnest attempt to investigate the issues these questions raise.

This preface will examine a few of those issues, addressing narration and narrative authority, the notion of cultural identity, the creation of the narrative universe, and the ethical issues of accurate historical representation in fiction. This preface will also address the questions

raised by the narrator Layla's position as the writer of these stories, to speak to her status as a privileged and cursed "insider-outsider" who bears the burden of the storytelling responsibility.

### *Narrative Authority*

All the stories in this collection, to some extent, grapple with narrative authority. I struggled during many moments in the writing process, unsure of the authority that I possessed as writer: How could I, a Palestinian-American living in the United States, give myself permission to write these stories? This uncertainty paradoxically propelled and stifled my writing. I felt unsatisfied with the omniscient third-person narrators I often chose for the stories. I questioned who the narrator was in relation to the characters and what gave the narrator the right to reveal intimate moments in the character's lives? For example, the narrator in "Arak" sounds very much like the narrator in "Fetat Hummus," two stories that focalize closely on two, very different characters. The similarity of the narrators in these stories made me uncomfortable, because the narrator seemed too real, too much like me, the writer.

Mario Vargas Llosa, discussing narrators, writes:

A narrator is a being made of words and not of flesh and blood, as authors tend to be; the former lives only within the confines of the story that is being told, and only while he is telling it (the boundaries of the story are those of existence)...The narrator is always a made-up character, a fictional being, just like all the other characters whose story he "tells" (*Letters to a Young Novelist*, 42).

This business of the narrator always being fictional is what I grappled with: I wanted the narrator to have authority to tell the story, to be as reliable as possible, but I also wanted the narrator to take part in the stories, to be a part of the action. Vargas Llosa discusses the types of narration, describing a "narrator-character" who is at once part of the action and also the person who tells

the story (44). However, Vargas Llosa describes the “narrator character” as using the first-person point of view, a type of narration riddled with problems of reliability. I looked to Junot Diaz’s *Drown* for reference, discovering that, while Yunion narrates and is also part of the action, his narrative reliability is constantly in question because of the close proximity he has to events that take place. Often, Yunion is confused for Junot Diaz himself, and many people discuss the novel as if Yunion *is* Diaz and vice-versa. I wanted to avoid this confusion at all costs, to make it clear that the narrator, the author, and the characters were all separate from one another, but connected by the text.

Orhan Pamuk discusses the issues that arise among readers who misunderstand the complex relationship between author, narrator and characters in his book, *The Naïve and Sentimental Novelist*. Pamuk describes two kinds of readers: One kind, the “naïve” reader, unable to separate the lived experiences of the author from the fictional events in the text, always searches for the autobiographical clues to connect the fiction to a reality (55). The other kind, the “sentimental-reflective” reader, ignores the lived experience of the author and regards the text as a work of fiction completely (55).

Although Pamuk describes types of readers to avoid, I also wanted to avoid the possibility that my stories might make a reader become either of these types. In other words, I did not want, at any point, to make a reader believe my stories are entirely fictional and divorced from my experiences, nor did I want to give the impression that I was writing purely from an autobiographical standpoint. In essence, the writing of these stories represented a conflict of identity. I often asked myself, “Who am I in relation to the Palestinian characters I have created?” Many Palestinian-American writers and poets experience this same conflict. Susan Abulhawa, writer of the novel *Mornings in Jenin*, writes of one of her characters, “I put Amal

into my life,” blurring boundaries between fiction and reality, lived experience and imagined experience, character and author (Abu-Shomar, 127).

*Mornings in Jenin* was major influence on the poetics of my collection of short stories. Amal, the central character and focalizing consciousness of the novel, is, in many ways, the inspiration for my own character, Layla. Through her novel, Abulhawa incorporates the historical realities of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict by connecting them to the fictional Albulheja family. Abulhawa creates a family line that stretches, in the novel, from 1941 to 2002. I created a family line for my own characters, the Al-Hakim family. Through these fictional family lines and historical realities, the writer and the narrator embark on a quest for identity and meaning within the Palestinian diaspora (Abu-Shomar).

Stuart Hall describes the process of positioning oneself in a cultural identity as both “being” and “becoming,” highlighting the twofold reality that cultural identity is not static, that it is constantly in-flux and contingent upon particular contexts and knowledges (Hall, 222). In this sense, both Amal from *Mornings in Jenin* and Layla from my collection are similar. Layla, a Palestinian-American, crosses physical and metaphorical borders constantly. She switches through languages and interrogates her relationship to those languages, expressing her feelings of being both “outsider” and “insider” simultaneously. Layla’s being a writer ties her closely to me, the author of the stories. That Layla is also writer is useful, too, because she engages in a reflexive process that the other characters do not; Layla constantly looks at the past, present and future, questioning reality and her position within that reality. For example, my story “Fetat Hummus” opens with Layla’s thoughts on Fareed, the rooster. She thinks about the way he lost the ability to crow, his “voice,” in an attack by a cat and recognizes something deeper, something

more meaningful. Her Aunt Huda, however, does not see this deeper meaning, dismissing the event as a simple of fact of life, nothing more.

This small detail in the beginning of the story frames Layla's central concern: how can she tell these stories, which she finds important, if her family – the subject of these stories – finds no value in written storytelling? In her memoir, *Tasting the Sky*, Ibtisam Barakat presents the issue of being compelled to write despite familial disinterest or outright silencing. She writes of how she and her mother “spoke” to each other through her journal. Barakat did not write directly to her mother in the sense of a direct address, but rather through an understanding that, when she left for school in the morning, her mother would sneak in her room and read her journal. This way, Barakat wrote to her mother, saying the things she wished she could say directly, but wrote them instead on paper. Her mother chose to remain silent about the words she read in her daughter's journal. Barakat also writes of how her mother often silenced her from speaking out against the Israeli soldiers they encountered often, fearing what could happen if her daughter resisted or spoke out. This important moment highlights the paradoxical relationship many Palestinians and Palestinian-Americans have with the written word. On one hand, we desire to talk, to speak, to engage in politics. On the other, like Barakat's mother, we find protection in the silence, a kind of refuge in trying to forget.

Layla, like Amal and Barakat, struggles with her identity. She crosses many borders, physical and metaphorical: the borders between girlhood and womanhood, English and Arabic, Palestine and Israel, El Paso and Mexico, American and Arab, writer and reader, outsider and insider. Despite recognizing these borders, Layla struggles with the identity she has chosen for herself, Palestinian-American, because she is in a constant state of being labelled and identified by other people. Hall's assertion that cultural identity is linked to the “politics of positioning” is

important here because Layla's process of identification is always suspect, always questioned: Is she American enough? Palestinian enough? Sometimes, the questioning and suspicion don't come from an outside voice, but from her own mind, reflecting the vulnerability of belonging to more than one cultural background (Hall, 226).

Palestinian-American poet Lisa Suhair Majaj addresses similar identity issues in her poem "Cadence:"

The Arab American woman hesitates.  
She's weary of living on only one side  
of the hyphen. Her poems aren't just translations,  
But if she blinks, someone always cries out,  
*Look at those Arab eyes!* (11-15)

Here, Majaj points out the issues many Arab-Americans face living in the United States in a post-9/11 world: because of their Arab-ness (however unrecognizable), their identity is not theirs to control. The control lies in the hands of those who would exoticize them or pin them to the stereotype of aggressor, of violent terrorists from the primitive Middle East. Though not as overtly aware of these complexities, Layla feels the same lack of control in her life and in her ability to identify fully with either one or both of her cultural backgrounds.

Faced with these complicated questions, I felt it necessary to erase myself as "author" of these stories, in favor of a narrator-character who could simultaneously be a part of the action (in the first-person sense), but who could also write in the third-person omniscient point-of-view. My solution to this point-of-view problem was to create a sense that Layla was writing all of the stories, as a narrator-character in a novel or short story would do, but through an entire collection of short stories. Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* serves as a model on which I based this

aspect of my collection. The opening story of Anderson's book, "The Book of the Grotesque" depicts an old writer who decides to write stories about the people in the town. This mixture of third-person omniscient point-of-view and first person suggests that Anderson himself is the narrator. However, at a distance, the stories that follow come directly from the old writer's Book of the Grotesque, bound by the themes and concerns outlined by the narrator in the first story.

In addition, in the stories that follow "The Book of the Grotesque," one central character appears consistently: George Willard. Nothing happens in the town that George Willard does not know about, and many of the characters expressly seek Willard out to tell him their stories. In this way, George Willard is at once a part of the action and removed from it. As a reporter, writes about the stories he hears, but he also influences those dramatic situations. He is a participant and an observer, just like Layla.

To make this distinction clear, Layla's journal entries are scattered throughout the collection of short stories. While in Burqa visiting her grandmother, Layla writes the journal entries as first-person narratives during the summer of 2014. The journals represent the present action of the collection as a whole and they provide a context to the stories, connecting characters, places and feelings. They attempt to fill in gaps between the stories that the omniscient third-person narrator can't answer. They also serve as examples of Layla's personal writing, which allows the reader to see her from two different perspectives, highlighting her status as a person who exists between rigid, defined borders.

For example, the first journal entry in the collection follows "Fetat Hummus," a story that focalizes on Layla. Dated "June 1, 2014," Layla expresses her discomfort with speaking Arabic and her desire to connect with her family, a desire that runs through the rest of the collection, especially in moments when Layla attempts to uncover secrets or mysteries of her family tree.



Similarly, Layla's desire to uncover secrets often echoes in other characters, such as Dalia in "The Tonsil Stone" or Saif in "Arak," characters (and "real life" people, family members, for Layla) both driven by the same compulsion to understand, to unveil mystery, and to connect with other human beings through language and honest love. The journal entries allow the reader to connect the characters together more closely; they allow the reader to see the deep closeness these characters share with one another. In a sense, the journals provide a poetic glimpse into Layla's observational world.

The journals also offer a sense of linear time not present within the short stories. Many of the short stories take place in different time periods because of the need for the historical reality and the familial history to line up correctly. However, the journal entries occur linearly, clearly time-stamped. They appear between the stories, fragments of Layla's family history, to provide the reader a clearer sense of time and place. Time, essential in these stories, frames the historical backdrop for the characters, an element central to what Vargas Llosa calls "the power of persuasion" within the collection:

The more independent and self-contained a novel seems to us, and the more everything happening in it gives us the impression of occurring as a result of the story's internal mechanism and not as a result of the arbitrary imposition of an outside will, the greater the novel's power of persuasion (27).

For the collection to feel real and complete, I relied on the accuracy of time frames, something that many other Palestinian and Palestinian-American writers also use to create a sense of wholeness in their books about Palestine. However, many of the stories in the collection don't occur in the time period Layla writes her journals. Some stories, like "The Tonsil Stone," "Daud and the Muskrat" and "The Chameleon," occur in the past and deal with Layla's family

members; others, such as “Suleiman the Saracen” and “Bedtime Stories for the Night of June 29, 2014” occur in the future and deal with fictional characters Layla creates.

Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani’s novella, *All That’s Left to You*, does something different: he attempts to tell the story of a brother and sister in Gaza through multiple viewpoints and voices in what he calls “a single burst,” with multiple characters speaking simultaneously (xxi). The entire story takes place in the time span of twenty-four hours, so Kanafani chooses to differentiate the different voices and time periods with varying font styles, as William Faulkner does in *The Sound and the Fury*. The frustrating experience of reading Kanafani’s novella and trying to track the linear progression of events and voices is useful in the way I thought about the collection stories. I knew that I wanted the reader to be situated linearly on a time frame, but I didn’t want it to be consistent or predictable. This thinking fed into the organization of the short stories. Instead of being organized in a linear fashion, the stories are organized around Layla’s discoveries.

As the stories progress, Layla uncovers secrets about her family that help her understand who they are as people, but also who she is as a person. Layla’s sense of identity, wrapped up in her family’s history, made it extremely important for her to be the fictional writer of the stories in this collection. Through this focalizing consciousness, Layla exposes family history and themes of displacement, exile, loss and the failure of storytelling. This same close quality with the focalized character occurs in Naomi Shihab Nye’s novel, *Habibi*, where the protagonist, Liyana, moves with her family to Palestine from Saint Louis, Missouri.

Like my collection of stories, Shihab Nye’s book uses a third-person omniscient narrator to tell Liyana’s story, but Shihab Nye often uses free indirect style to erase the distance between character and narrator. Liyana’s experiences in the book also mirror much of Shihab Nye’s

biographical information. Both move from Saint Louis to the West Bank, both are Palestinian-Americans and are uncomfortable speaking Arabic freely. Many of the stories in my collection also depend on my own biographical information, lived experiences and memories inserted into the narratives. The decision to include aspects of my own lived experience was not a conscious decision but an organic one, a necessary one. Although I struggled with the question of whether I had that authority to tell the stories, I found that, through Layla, I could insert moments from my own experience in to the narrative and they could come alive for Layla through fictional retelling.

As Pamuk points out, in the novel, a genre that toes the line between autobiography and fiction, the author and the reader constantly negotiate the borders between reality and imagination. The decision to place Layla as a focalizing consciousness came rather late in the writing process, as a result of the need to tell stories through the eyes of a character who constantly questioned her cultural identity. Pamuk discusses this process of identification with one's characters, ultimately arguing that the author must be both naïve and sentimental when writing to capture the characters effectively, creating an awareness of both the artifice and the magical, imaginative process of fiction writing (70).

So, why focus on Layla? Why not focus on another character, such as Saif? The answer is simple: Layla, the most autobiographical of the characters in the collection, is the only character simultaneously both insider and outsider, the only character who expresses her discomfort at living on the border between two languages and two worlds. Saif, although arguably also a person who passes between multiple borders, does not necessarily reflect on these borders. Pamuk's book is helpful to understand why this might be:

The art of the novel is the knack of being able to speak about ourselves as if we were another person, and about others as if we were in their shoes. And just as there is a limit to the extent we can speak about ourselves as if we were another person, there is also a limit to how much we can identify with another person (71).

This statement seems obvious when discussing human relationships, but it is not that obvious when one thinks about fiction. Often, fiction, thought of as providing the author unlimited access to characters, allows the author full control of the way the character acts, thinks, and reacts in the narrative universe. However, as Pamuk's statement suggests, this is not always true. In fiction, characters take a life-essence no longer under the author's control, thereby putting limits on the author's ability to identify with that character, much in the same way as people are limited in their understanding or identification with other people.

Saif, not as accessible to me as an author as Layla, represents an entirely different kind of character. Unable to control his anger, he is ruled by frustration, stagnation and a crippling sense of shame tied to his sense of his own masculinity as a person with same-sex desires in a repressive society. That's not to say that Saif is entirely inaccessible. Because the stories are framed from Layla's consciousness, a certain closeness to Saif is also managed, despite the use of third-person omniscient narration and the unanswered and unresolved questions in "Arak" and the journal entries. Layla's closeness to her cousin in the narrative universe and their connection to her through the stories, but also through family lines, makes the narrative universe whole and adds to the power of persuasion for the collection. As in *Winesburg, Ohio*, I tried to create a sense of wholeness through family lines, recurring characters and images, and through geographical space.

*Narrative Universe*

The narrative universe of the collection is based on the real, physical space of the West Bank, Gaza and Israel. Many of the stories take place in Nablus and a nearby village, the village where my family comes from, called Burqa. These locations are not fictionalized, unlike Faulkner's Jefferson or Anderson's Winesburg; they are real places on the globe. But this assertion is becoming increasingly more difficult to argue, given the rise of settlements and the denial of the Palestinian right to self-determination. Thus, many Palestinian writers underscore the importance of portraying real towns. For example, despite its experimentation with time and narration, Kanafani's novella, based in Gaza, depicts, in explicit detail, the desperation and frustration of the people who live there. Similarly, Sahar Khalifeh's, *Wild Thorns*, paints an idyllic picture of Palestine in the first chapter of the novel:

The mountain road was steep, and the scent from the arched pines overwhelmed him, reminding him of what to expect beyond the bridge. The pine forests of Jirzim, of al-Tur, of Ramallah. Pine trees, prickly pears, almonds, grapes, figs, olives. Mount Sinai and that 'peaceful land' that has never known peace. No; perhaps it had, once. A land of milk and honey, the 'promised land'" (5).

In this opening paragraph of the novel, the character, unnamed until later, seems to be less important than the description of the location. The narrator's attention to detail in describing the symbols of Palestine – figs, olives, pine trees – proves Pamuk's assertion that the "golden rule" of the novel is to create the sense within the reader that all descriptions, even ones in which the characters do not appear, are important to the "emotional, sensual and psychological world of the protagonists" (80). As many Palestinian writers and thinkers attest, connection to the land is important to Palestinian national identity. Land and right to ownership, at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, shape and inform Palestinian identity much in the same way that freedom of

speech shapes the United States' national identity - the backbone of what it means to be a Palestinian.

With this fact in mind, I had to address the glaring fact that I was not physically in Palestine while I wrote these stories and had not stepped foot in the West Bank for almost twenty years. Naturally, I relied on other writers for information about the current state of affairs for Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza. As I mentioned before, although I'm not writing autobiographical or documentary style short stories, I wanted to depict the historical background and realities as accurately as possible, not just for the persuasive power of the collection but also for the ethical reasons for depicting a place and a people accurately and sensitively.

For an accurate understanding of the current oppressive state of affairs that many Palestinians exist under, I relied on the book *Palestine Inside Out* by Saree Makdisi, a book that uncovers the realities of daily life for Palestinians, highlighting everyday obstacles, such as checkpoints and curfews. Makdisi's book, an important reference for the collection, provides a contemporary context for the stories. The lived reality for the characters in the collection is not one of constant military bombardment (although, that is a reality at other points in their histories). In contrast, the characters live in a reality that somewhat normalizes the occupation, or tolerates it to some degree as an inevitable element of Palestinian life in the West Bank. This mirrors Makdisi's central argument that Israel's control and occupation of Palestinians are not maintained by scattered wars or battles, but by a constant state of control of Palestinians daily lives. He writes:

The defining feature of Israeli occupation of Palestine remains its comprehensive saturation of everyday life through a stifling bureaucracy, a regime of permits and passes

for which Palestinians must apply, and an iron grid of militarily imposed regulations with which they must comply in order to conduct their lives (Makdisi 299).

Not all of the stories in the collection address this kind of control as a central concern in the narrative, but they all address the occupation in their own way. The story “One Day,” for example, focuses on Layla’s uncle Yahya, his wife and their sons, Haroun and Daud, Layla’s first cousins, who feature in other moments in the collection and deal with the occupation, too. In “One Day,” Yahya learns that his family’s visa has been accepted and he will be able to immigrate to the United States to be with his brother, Layla’s father. The news of his approved visa propels Yahya into a hopeful state and he imagines his life in the United States will be different, free from the oppressive occupation. Yahya walks through the streets of Nablus as if seeing it for the first time, feeling happy and hopeful for the first time in a long while. However, that happiness escapes him when he and his family are at a checkpoint on their way to Amman, Jordan. Subjected to a humiliating strip search while a crowd watches, Yahya feels emasculated, especially since it occurs in front of his two sons. However, Yahya does not let go of the hope for his future in the United States, however far away it might be.

One can read Yahya’s final insistence that hope still remains in his future in two ways: one, the reader might find a respite from the oppressiveness, believing that the United States will truly offer freedom for Yahya; two, the reader will understand, as the narrator of “One Day” seems to understand, that Yahya and his family will never truly find freedom because life for a Palestinian outside of Palestine is a life of exile and full of a constant desire to return to the mythic motherland. Yahya will never escape his identity as a Palestinian and an Arab – it will become a prison of sorts for him, just as it has become a prison for other characters in the collection.

In this way, the narrative universe of Palestine in the collection seems “real” because of the way the characters move inside the fictional world. Similarly, the way the characters feel about certain descriptive elements within the collection mimics the way other Palestinian writers write of Palestine in more metaphorical ways. As with Khalifeh’s idyllic description of the Palestinian landscape, many other writers hone in on small descriptive elements that, through repetition, take on a deeper meaning. For example, Kanafani’s descriptions of the sun in *All That’s Left to You* take on a different meaning through the way the characters react to it. Instead of being a source of energy and warmth for Adil, one of the protagonists, the sun is an oppressive presence, much like the oppressive presence of Israeli forces in his homeland.

While my stories do not have the sweeping descriptions of such landscapes, certain descriptive elements recur throughout the stories to create a sense of continuity within the narrative universe and how it appears. For example, the mention of “blue light” reappears in many of the stories. Many of the characters, such as Haroun, Dalia, Layla, and Saif, recognize the blue light at different times of day and describe it in relation to how they feel. Sometimes, it is purely observational. Other times, as in “The Chameleon,” the blue light shapes the meaning of the story in a certain way. “The Chameleon” opens with the sentence, “Blue light has a way of making everything feel old, dusty,” suggesting that Layla and Haroun associate the blue light with the inevitability of an ending, an ending of the day, an ending of the story, or an ending of a life – all of these options felt viscerally by all of the characters at different stages in their lives and in the stories.

The grandmother and matriarch of the Al-Hakim family, Teta Basima, and her farm are a reappears throughout the stories, anchors for the other characters’ memories. Teta Basima’s farm, a central feature of the stories “Fetat Hummus” and “The Chameleon,” backdrops the



occupation and the threat of great loss. That the Al-Hakim family has a consistent, static home on Teta Basima's farm is a luxury that many of the other characters do not have. Through minute details, I describe many of the other homes in the collection in contrast to Teta Basima's house. For example, Dalia's apartment in "The Tonsil Stone" is small and cramped; Saif's "home" on the construction site is a makeshift, bare room, unstable and under constant threat of being disrupted. In contrast, Teta Basima's house has a garden protected by a gate, something that provides safety and privacy and gives the family as sense of belonging.

Houses play an important metaphorical role in Palestinian literature and film. Due to the contested nature of a Palestinian's "right" to live in his or her home, the concrete image of the house and the more abstract familial structure representing a house play large roles in the Palestinian consciousness. Often, houses represent the long histories and existence of Palestinian families in their respective villages, houses in Palestine serving as a reminder to the world that Palestinians still live in their homeland, the place of their birth. To own a house and land in Palestine is a privilege, a fact not lost on those lucky enough to still hold land rights.

It is a much different story for those whose families have lost land rights. *Salt of This Sea*, a film directed by Annemarie Jacir, deals with this reality explicitly. In the film, Soraya, a Palestinian-American woman from Brooklyn, returns to Palestine to reclaim her family's lost home in Jaffa. Soraya's thorny attitude and confrontational behavior toward Israeli soldiers proves her outsider status as a person somehow removed from the realities of living in Palestine. Ironically, this "outsider" status grants her the ability to return to Jaffa and confront the family currently living in her family's ancestral home. Soraya, through her "outsider" status discovers and builds her identity on her journey to return home. Like Layla, she uncovers layers of mysteries within her family and builds a new sense of her own cultural identity along the way.

### *Insider-Outsider*

I thought a lot about Soraya when I wrote Layla's character, but I also needed someone to counter Layla's "insider-outsider" status as an Arab-American in Palestine. I found this to be in the character of Dalia, Layla's cousin, who, through her central story "The Tonsil Stone," also uncovers mysteries about her family, but reacts in a different way. Layla, through her discoveries, seems to find the promise of agency, evidenced by the final story, a fictional piece written by Layla about a father who uses storytelling to stave off fears for his children's safety in the threat of Israeli attacks on Gaza. Dalia, on the other hand, can't make anything from her discoveries, her only reaction inaction.

In "The Tonsil Stone," Dalia is plagued by recurring stones in her throat, tonsil stones, little balls of accumulated particles of old food that accumulate in the folds of the tonsils. She's inherited this affliction from her father, who, in the present action of the story, is dying of lung cancer. Throughout the story, Dalia has memories of her family's past, notably the suicide bombing of her brother, Hamzeh. The conflict for Dalia arises from memory of her father attempting to stop a young man from joining a suicide bombing mission on a winter evening when she was twelve. Unlike Layla's experience with her grandmother, Teta Basima telling Layla the full story about her cousin's death, Dalia does not receive closure or comfort from her father. They never speak about the event after it happens. The only result of this event is that Dalia coughs up tonsil stones. The stones themselves become metaphors for her inability to communicate with her father about difficult topics, but they also become a representation of the stagnation of thought and freedom Palestinians experience under the occupation.

Dalia's inability to do anything with the information she receives developed in the journal entry in which Layla writes, "Dalia doesn't understand why I care so much about writing

down our stories,” proves Dalia’s frozenness, her inability to affect change for her family. Layla, on the other hand, writes stories. Even if the stories themselves do not affect change in a large way, Layla negotiates her cultural identity through them and thus finds a sort of solace in understanding her family through their language and their secrets.

As evidenced in the journal entries, Dalia takes up smoking, doomed to repeat the life her father led before her. Layla’s other cousins also show this cycle: Daud is killed in an unexplained encounter with an Israeli soldier; Haroun’s foray into zoo-keeping has disastrous effects; Saif’s repressed sexuality and emasculation lead him to violence and life on the run. Even the fictional characters Layla creates - characters who are not her cousins - experience loss, unable to change their dire circumstances: Suleiman is plagued by visions of the Saracens, propelling his mind into the past, where he plays out crusader era battles and loses his connection to reality; the unnamed, dusty hobo in “The Stranger” tries to make connections through storytelling; the father in “Bedtime Stories for the Night of June 29, 2014,” trapped by the confines of his small city, Gaza, and by impending Israeli attacks, is overwhelmed by the immense tragedy he senses he and his family are on the brink of.

Many of the characters do not shirk the act of storytelling, provided it remains oral in its expression. Teta Basima tells the story of Hamzeh, spurred by the emotional content of a Fairouz song. Baba, the father from “Bedtime Stories” uses storytelling to escape the gruesome reality of an Israeli attack on Gaza, his main interest to protect his children. Saif tells Adam his family story, and vice versa, but none of the characters ever write these stories down. Only Layla, engaged with that kind of “permanent” storytelling, cements her “insider-outsider” status, a clear advantage for narrative authority.

*Possibilities of a Diasporic Imagination*

In an essay about Susan Abulhawa's, *Mornings in Jenin*, Ayman Abu-Shomar discusses an "epistemology of Diaspora" that the author contributes to through the creation of "diasporic spaces of negotiation and reconciliation" (135). Abu-Shomar argues that Amal of *Mornings in Jenin* becomes, through her diasporic identity and exploration of "the triangulated relationship between the self, time and place," a representation of humanity and kindness in the face of terrible violence, cruelty and conflict (132). I attempted to recreate the same effect within the character of Layla, a person negotiating the spaces in between her split identities allowing her to be a kinder, more careful, and a more considerate narrator, able to look at the complex realities of the occupation and not make sweeping judgments.

So often, in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, polarized factions abandon discussions as quickly as they open them up. My hopes for this collection were to cite the stories as examples, as Susan Abulhawa's novel does, in an "epistemology of Diaspora" that understands identity as not dualistic or static but as constantly being questioned and in various degrees of realization. Liyana, the Palestinian-American protagonist of Nye's *Habibi*, navigates and crosses borders that seem so black and white for the rest of her family, finding humanity and even love in the character of a young Jewish boy because she does not see the world in dualistic, rigid categories. These three characters, Amal, Liyana and Layla, exhibit what Gloria Anzaldúa calls "mestiza consciousness." They have a marked tolerance for the ambiguous, not interested in defining easily recognizable categories, favoring instead to abolish such simplistic boundaries (Anzaldúa, 102). Through Layla's diasporic identity, understood by the backdrop of the occupation and her displacement from her ancestral homeland, serves as a platform for the other characters to discover their own relationships to family and the Palestinian condition.

I hope the collection, when fully realized, will participate in a new kind of thinking about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, one that recognizes the humanity on both sides of the wall. Through this diasporic identity, represented in the written word, I hope that these stories will contribute, in Anzaldúa words, to “healing the split” between the borders erected by the pervasive presence of dualistic thought (102). This diasporic consciousness refuses to ignore the harsh realities of violence and conflict. In contrast, by being both insider and outsider, the diasporic individual’s awareness of the violence committed on both sides of the conflict is kinder, more complex, less interested in dualisms and harsh renderings of judgment.

I will end with a quote from Abulhawa’s book, one that accurately describes the position of the diasporic individual who takes on the task of addressing a polarized conflict: “For if life had taught her [Amal] anything, it was that healing and peace can begin only with acknowledgment of wrongs committed.” That is what I hope this collection will ultimately do: not to serve as a condemnation, a manifesto, or a diagram of proposed solutions to an immense problem, but to be a testament to the humanity of individuals who, despite facing constant loss, sorrow and violence, can find love, kindness and understanding within themselves to heal the immense chasms that erupt in their families and identities.

## **Fetat Hummus**

Fareed, the sole rooster on Teta Basima's farm, crowed at dawn. In Aunt Huda's bedroom, Layla woke up with a start.

Layla visited her family's farm every other summer, but she could never get used to Fareed's crow. An assertive, stringy bird, Fareed constantly picked fights with the cats on the farm, puffing up his feathers and pecking at their paws. One day, a large tabby cat fought back, puncturing his throat and forever changing his crow. To Layla, the story sounded like some kind of fairy tale; she felt it should have some kind of deeper meaning, a message that she should write about. When she told her aunt this, Huda merely shrugged and said, "It's life. Sometimes you lose a voice, sometimes you take a voice." With that, the matter of Fareed's crow was closed.

Layla lay in bed for a few minutes watching the sun filter in through the shutters of the bedroom. The light at dawn in Burqa was not so different from the light at dawn in El Paso – the rays of sun had an ephemeral quality to them, sparkling against whatever surface they touched. She watched the rays splay out on her aunt's white armoire, breaking up the blue dustiness of the early morning that coated the entire room. Layla heard her grandmother in the kitchen and got up out of bed.

Teta Basima was filling the kettle for her morning coffee when Layla walked in the kitchen.

*"Sabah el-kheir, habibty. Nimty imneeh?"* Her grandmother's voice was warm, her words rolled out of her throat softly, like little pads of dough.

Layla wanted more than anything to respond to her grandmother in Arabic, to say "Good morning, Teta. Yes, I slept very well, thank you" but her Arabic always hardened in her throat

like cement. She settled for a nod and a smile.

Teta Basima smiled back and continued on breakfast in silence.

Aunt Huda walked in from feeding the chickens, wiping her hands on her house dress. Layla felt relieved, her aunt could now translate anything she might want to say to her grandmother. Huda smiled when she saw Layla sitting at the kitchen table.

“*Ya ahla Layla!* We are happy to have you here with us again. Mama always talks about you to the neighbors when you’re not around.” Huda sat down at the table across from Layla.

“Yes, I always enjoy coming to Burqa. I wish I could come more often.” Layla wondered if her grandmother only spoke about her because she was her only son’s daughter. She watched as her grandmother broke eggs into a frying pan.

“Yes, I wish so too,” said Huda. “*Yla*, let’s get you some coffee.”

They ate breakfast together at the small kitchen table, listening to Fareed’s endless crowing and talking little. Layla was happy to finally be eating Arabic breakfast again. Her grandmother had made *ful*, a paste made of fava beans, scrambled eggs, *hummus*, *falafel* and fresh pita bread. She even set out some of the *jibnet nabulsi*, a hard cheese pickled in brine and then fried.

“I love Teta’s breakfasts,” Layla said, hoping to start a conversation. She felt the weight of the language gap between her and her grandmother; she wanted to lift some of the uncomfortable air in the room.

“Mmm, Mama makes the best breakfasts,” Huda said. She turned to her mother to translate what Layla had said.

“*Sahtain*,” said Teta Basima, nodding her head and smiling.

Layla was familiar with this response. It literally translated to “two healths,” something that made her laugh when she was a kid. She found the concept of having two separate health-lives funny, almost like generating Health Points in a video game. As though health were something to be quantified.

“*Yislamu eideki*,” Layla said to her grandmother, with a smile and nod. The Arabic blessing came out garbled, slow and sticky from her throat. She felt sheepish immediately after the words left her mouth, her cheeks blushed pink.

“*Wa eideki, habibty*,” said Teta Basima. She smiled at her granddaughter, but Layla could tell there was a blankness in her eyes, something that seemed to suggest she was embarrassed, too.

The three women resumed their breakfast without words, with only an occasional crow from Fareed to break up the silence.

After breakfast, Layla went outside to read and enjoy the quiet summer air of the village. Most of the other villagers were already awake, she could smell the smoke from the fires the olive farmers made to dispose of dead brush that choked the ground around the trees. To her, Burqa always smelled like burning. Not a burning that smelled the way a house-fire smells, but a natural one. A burning smell that entered her physical body, but seared through to her memories as well.

While Layla sat, reading English translations of Mahmoud Darwish and smelling the smoke, Teta Basima came out to tend to her garden. Teta Basima’s garden was the envy of all the other village women. She often boasted about her tomato plants, showing the other women the seed packages her son, Layla’s father, sent over from the States. Teta Basima would flash the



seed packets at the women and say, “Nothing like this here in Burqa. I’m the only person with beefsteak tomatoes in her garden!”

At least that’s what Aunt Huda told Layla. Layla knew her grandmother loved her garden, especially the beefsteak tomatoes, but her grandmother never spoke to her about it.

Layla hated her throat for always choking on Arabic words. She spent hours practicing Arabic on her own. She could fully understand everything her family said in Arabic, but she could never actually speak with them. Her tongue was like a closed gate, always keeping the Arabic at bay.

Teta Basima smiled at Layla, walking past her with her watering can. She was a short, fat woman, and she huffed when she walked. Layla felt compelled to ask her if she needed help, even though her grandmother looked perfectly capable of completing the task on her own. Layla put down her book.

“*Asa’dek Teta?*” Layla hoped she had used the correct conjugation for the verb “to help.”

Her grandmother looked at her, smiled and shook her head. She then mimed that all she was doing was watering the morning glories. Layla nodded and went back to her book.

Teta Basima and ‘Amto Huda began preparing lunch around eleven in the morning. Layla sat in the kitchen, watching her grandmother and aunt core the zucchini squash, stuff them with a mixture of rice and ground beef, and place them into a huge pot. Every now and then she would ask questions, “what is that spice?” and “how much salt did you add to this mixture?” to keep track of what was happening. Sometimes, Layla felt that her grandmother’s food just appeared out of thin air; Teta Basima worked so quickly and with so much craft in her cooking, she made it seem like magic.

Soon, the kitchen filled with the smell of the food. Layla's stomach tilted inside of her, she could hardly wait to eat.

"Who else is coming to lunch?" Layla asked her aunt, who was now cutting cucumbers up for salad.

"Aunt Widad, Mazen and Dalia."

"Oh, good." Layla said, not knowing what to do with the information. She wasn't sure how to feel about her cousins. They used to spend every summer playing in the village with the other neighborhood kids, but this summer, her cousin Dalia seemed different. Her father had just died of lung cancer and Aunt Widad, stricken with grief, barely spoke.

Teta Basima began smashing up the cores of the zucchini squash in a bowl to make a dipping sauce. Layla watched her as she filled a saucepan with the squash and added salt, cinnamon, and pepper to the mixture. Layla had a thought.

"Amto, can you ask Teta if she ever records her recipes?"

Huda looked unsure of the question, "what do you mean, writes them down?"

"Yeah, does she write them anywhere?" Layla knew her grandmother only has a sixth grade education, but she was sure she knew how to write a basic recipe.

Huda asked her mother if she ever recorded her recipes. Teta Basima chuckled and looked at Layla. She shook her head and told Huda that the recipes were all recorded in her head, not on paper.

Layla didn't wait for Huda to translate.

"Ask her if it's okay if we work on writing some down. I'd like to write a small recipe book to take back to El Paso. Tell her I miss her cooking when I'm in the States."

Huda told her mother what Layla said. Again, Layla's grandmother chuckled, as if

embarrassed by the attention. She shrugged her shoulders and nodded her head, telling Huda that it would be fine if Layla wrote down the recipes. Her grandmother then asked if Layla understood enough Arabic to write things down. Huda told her that Layla could understand everything, that she was a *shtoora*, a smart girl.

“*Tb, lesh ma btehky?*” Teta Basima looked at Layla while she asked Huda the question. Layla had heard it so many times before. She was tired of explaining the way her throat clams up when she tried to speak the Arabic she understands so well.

Huda just shrugged her shoulders and looked at Layla, too.

“Thank you, Teta,” Layla said. She turned to her aunt and said, “Please let her know, I want to record some recipes tomorrow.”

Huda told her mother. Teta Basima looked at Layla and nodded a confirmation.

Layla woke up to Fareed’s crow again the next morning. She rose from bed and went straight to the kitchen to find her grandmother. She brought a notebook and pen with her to record anything her grandmother might be working on.

Teta Basima was at the sink, shelling hard-boiled eggs for breakfast.

“*Sabah el-kheir*,” Layla said in a soft voice.

Teta Basima turned her head to see Layla. “*Sabah el-kheir, habibty*,” she said, and turned back to her eggs.

Layla sat at the table with her notebook and pen. They both said nothing for a while. Finally, Teta Basima turned to the table and set a plate of hard-boiled eggs on the table. She took a tray from the counter and loaded it with a small bowl of olive oil, a small bowl of *za’atar*, a mixture of dried thyme, roasted sesame seeds and citric salt, a saucer of apricot jam, and a saucer

with a pile of salt on one side and a pile of pepper on the other. Layla understood: this was breakfast.

‘Amto Huda walked in from outside. They all sat at the table and ate, talking very little. Layla again tried to break through the awkward air with a question.

“Amto, may you ask Teta if she ever makes *fetat hummus*?”

“No, *habibty*, she never makes that dish.” Layla noticed her aunt hadn’t even asked Teta Basima the question. She wondered if there was something offensive about it.

“Why not?”

“We just don’t make it. We don’t like the taste.” Huda waved a piece of pita in the air to dismiss the question.

Layla could tell she was avoiding something.

For the rest of breakfast, Layla wondered what it was.

After breakfast, Layla went out to read in the garden. This time she took Barghouti’s *I Saw Ramallah*, the English translation. She liked to read Palestinian novels and poems. The prose was unabashedly melodramatic at times. She loved the heightened drama of Mahmoud Darwish’s words, the overly sentimental way exiled Palestinian writers like him speak about “the motherland,” the land of milk and honey. When she was a young teenager, her father’s memories embarrassed her, she never understood how the land could cause grown men to weep. She even had a hard time understanding it when she was in El Paso. But now, being in Burqa and smelling the sweet burning smell of the olive grove underbrush, she understood. She wished she could express it in the language of the land, not as a stranger with a strange tongue.

Teta Basima stepped into the garden with her watering can, huffing as she walked. Layla

stood up when she saw her grandmother, hoping to ask her what Huda did not ask her at breakfast.

Layla readied the words in her head, selected them carefully and lined them up at the back of her throat, ready to be spoken.

“*Teta, bdek musa ’ideh?*” She changed the way she asked her grandmother if she needed help. She felt that this way was more formal, more polite.

Teta shook her head as she had done before, “*la, shukran, habibty.*”

Layla nodded, the words she had lined up to say next felt clogged at the back of her throat. She coughed slightly.

“*Teta? ’endy su ’al. Ta ’refy ta ’mely fetat hummus?*” She knew the words were juvenile; that the sentence structure was basic. She felt sheepish again.

Her grandmother stopped watering the tomatoes and looked at Layla. This was the first time Layla had ventured to ask her anything remotely this personal, and in Arabic, before.

Teta Basima nodded. “*A ’raf, bs ma bahibo.*” She resumed her watering, turning her body slightly away from her granddaughter.

Layla was not satisfied with the answer. She couldn’t believe that her grandmother would know how to make something as delicious as *fetat hummus* and still insist on not liking it. Layla could tell her grandmother was keeping something from her.

Over the following days, Layla watched her grandmother cook and transcribed the recipes. She wrote down the recipe for stuffed grape leaves, cooked yoghurt and rice, potatoes and broth, and even *mlukhiyeh*, a type of soup made out of jute leaves. Layla still struggled with her Arabic, usually resorting to basic questions such as “what is this?” or “how much?” to ask

about the ingredients. Much of this process involved miming, so Layla had to be close to her grandmother while she cooked, leaning over the stove to see how much salt she put into a pot of browning beef, or sticking her head into the oven to see how her grandmother checked the doneness of the stuffed potatoes.

Layla had not asked about the *fetat hummus* since that morning in the garden. This morning, she decided to try again. She lined up her Arabic words.

“Teta, *mumken ta'mely fetat hummus bokra? Bdy ajarbo.*” Layla decided it was best to ask her grandmother to make the dish, that way maybe she would concede and finally let her granddaughter be a part of what seemed to be a huge family secret.

Her grandmother was stirring a mixture of eggs, flour, parsley and spices to make an omelet. She didn't answer for a few seconds. Layla put her hands behind her back and waited, uncertain of what to expect. She watched her grandmother, who was looking down determinedly into the bowl as she stirred.

Finally, she turned her face up to look at Layla. Her eyes were watery, shining behind her metal-rimmed glasses.

“*Tayeb, habibty. Ha'amalik fetat hummus bokra.*” Then, she turned to back to her stirring, reaching over to the small radio she kept on the kitchen counter and flipping it on. She cooked the rest of breakfast in silence, listening to Fairouz sing about Lebanon.

Layla was happy her grandmother agreed to make *fetat hummus* for her, but she couldn't help but wonder if she had made a mistake in asking her to make the dish. She kept her head down throughout breakfast, listening to her grandmother and aunt sing along softly with Fairouz.

The next morning, Layla was awake before Fareed began to crow. She lay in bed, staring

out at her grandmother's garden through the bedroom window. She knew it was getting close to dawn because the blue dustiness that filled the bedroom was beginning to be compromised by sunlight. She heard Fareed's long, wheezing scream of a crow. Layla stood up, stretched and walked out.

The radio was already on when walked into the kitchen. Her grandmother stood by the sink, peeling the skins off of chickpeas for the *fetat hummus*. Layla went over to stand by her, kissing her grandmother on the cheek and saying good morning in Arabic as she always did. Phrases like "good morning" "I love you" and "good night" were easy for Layla, her father trained her to say them when she was a young girl. Now, they tumbled out of her mouth as easily as any English word. She didn't have to line the sentences up in throat before she spoke them.

Her grandmother hummed as she peeled the skins of the chickpeas. The radio played Fairouz again, a repeat of the songs from the previous morning. Layla heard Fairouz so much when she was a little kid, she used to think it was a sort of rite-of-passage into Palestinian-hood. Disliking Fairouz was an automatic revocation of your right to call yourself a Palestinian; at least that's what her father made it seem like to her. When Layla was younger she supposed it was kind of like if her Texan mother didn't like ZZ Top.

Teta Basima seemed to be a better mood this morning, she was a lot more talkative than she had ever been. She narrated everything she was doing, telling Layla exactly how to smash the chickpeas up into paste, how much salt to add to the mixture, how to douse it in olive oil without drowning out the delicate flavor of the sesame paste mixed in with the smashed chickpeas. Then came to most important aspect of the dish, the shredded bread, or *feteh*.

The two women sat at the kitchen table to prepare the bread. Teta Basima brought a huge

round tray full of fresh pita from the bakery and set it down. She carefully lifted one of the loaves and showed Layla how to pull apart the pieces, making them not too small and not too big.

*“Hek lazem itkoon el-khubz, ‘ad esba’ik el-izgheera.”* She lifted up her pinky finger to show Layla how to measure the bread. Her little finger was small and covered in the sheen of olive oil. Layla nodded, understanding the instruction.

Huda walked in the kitchen as they were pulling apart pieces of bread. She made some Turkish coffee for all of them and sat down.

“How do you like this work? It’s a lot, no?” Huda said to Layla.

“I don’t mind all the work. I’m sure it’s going to be worth it once we eat.” Layla smiled at her grandmother when she said this, her grandmother smiled back.

“It’s always worth it in the end, when the work is done,” said Huda.

Fairouz’s *“Ana wa Shadi”* came on the radio. Huda jumped up with a little shout.

“My favorite!” She said, rushing over to turn the volume on the radio higher.

Fairouz’s voice poured out from the tiny speaker.

*Mn zaman ana w sghreery...kan fi sub’y...*

Huda stood at the counter, singing. She had her hand held up to her chest, as if cradling her heart.

*Ija mn el-ahrash...il’ab ana w ya...*

Teta Basima was also singing along, closing her eyes.

*Kan ismu Shadi...*

Layla knew this song. It was about a boy named Shadi that used to play with the singer in



Lebanon before the civil war erupted. Fairuz sang of how Shadi became lost in the valley forever, and how she continued to grow old while Shadi stayed a child. Layla loved the poetry of the lyrics; the sadness and the loss did not overpower the beauty of the words.

Layla looked back up at her grandmother, she was crying. Tears fell down her cheeks and on to the pile of shredded bread they both made. She reached across the table and put her hand on her grandmother's.

*"Sho sar, Teta? Fi she?"* The words tumbled out of her mouth so quickly, Layla didn't have time to line them up.

Her grandmother let out short, tiny sobs. Her chest heaving up and down with each breath and release.

Huda turned the radio off, hurrying back to her mother.

*"Mama, mama...ma'alesh. Ma sar she, ma sar she."*

Layla hated that word, *ma'alesh*. It was used to mean "don't worry" but what it really said was "no problem," as though whatever the person was worried or sad about could be reduced to something minute, something that shouldn't have an effect. She wished she knew how to tell her grandmother that it was okay to cry but, the words were not lining up for her anymore.

Her grandmother's sobs began to fade. Teta Basima wiped tears from her cheeks with the back of her oily hand, sighing sharply. Layla wanted to know why the song had caused such a reaction but she did not dare ask. She didn't want to hurt her grandmother any more than she was already hurt.

Finally, her grandmother spoke.

“You never knew your cousin, Hamzeh, but you would have loved him with all your heart if you did.” Teta Basima spoke in Arabic, but this time she looked straight at Layla, as if to say “I know you can understand me.” And Layla could understand her.

“Hamzeh was your aunt Widad’s first son. He was a little fighter, a rebellious little boy. We used to call him Rambo because, after he saw that movie in a theatre in Kuwait, he always carried a plastic gun on his shoulder wherever he went.”

Layla wondered why she had never heard of Hamzeh before. Or seen a photograph of him anywhere around her grandmother’s house.

“Hamzeh was always playing outside with the neighborhood boys and getting into fights. He would pelt people with little plastic bullets from his toy gun. The other mothers complained to Widad that Hamzeh was calling their children “*yahudi*” and shooting them.

Layla knew not to take the word *yahudi* and translate it to its literal meaning: Jew. She knew that in Palestine, *yahudi* meant Israeli – not someone who practiced Judaism. She had given up on trying to explain the difference in wording to her aunt and grandmother, they just couldn’t separate the two.

Teta Basima took a deep breath and continued.

“Hamzeh grew up here, with me, because your Uncle Nasser’s brother became very sick with kidney disease and he and your Aunt Widad had to move to Amman to help with the treatment. Widad was young, she couldn’t handle the stress. Your grandfather had already died by then and Huda was only fifteen, I felt that having Hamzeh would keep this house from feeling like a tomb. I pushed Widad to let me keep Hamzeh here. She allowed it.”

Huda shook her head at the memory. Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes. She wiped them away before they fell.

“A few years passed and Widad stayed in Amman. Nasser’s brother needed constant care, even during the months when he began to feel better. It was too risky for them to move back to this small village. By then, Hamzeh had made this place his home; he didn’t want to move to Amman with his mother and father. They missed him, but allowed him to stay here. Burqa wasn’t like Ramallah or Jenin, the fighting wasn’t so bad and there were hardly any soldiers posted around the town. Hamzeh started high school here. He did well, got good grades and kept out of trouble, for the most part. He still got into fights at school, but the other boys had caught up with him by then – he didn’t always win the scuffles. Then, he met Ibraheem and everything changed.”

Huda shook her head again, “*yikhrīb beito*” she said. Layla understood the mild curse, it literally meant that Huda hoped Ibraheem’s house would break down. But Layla knew that it really meant Huda wished Ibraheem would never find peace, never know stability, never truly be at rest.

“Hamzeh and Ibraheem started to skip classes together. They left school to join the men at the coffee shop who spent their afternoons making plans to join the Intifada, something people were whispering about a lot. Hamzeh and Ibraheem were seduced by their words, their ideals. Hamzeh would come home every afternoon with new books, new posters. He never took his *hatta* off, even in the summer heat.”

Layla thought of her own *hatta*, the one she wore during winter in El Paso. The black and white scarf had little meaning to anyone there, but she knew that wearing it in Palestine was sometimes enough to get you shot.

Her grandmother paused for a moment to sip from her now cold Turkish coffee. Her cheeks were still shiny from the oil that transferred from her hands when she wiped her tears

away.

“One night, Hamzeh did not come home. All that week he had stayed out very late, we would argue often. He told me I was not his mother and he didn’t have to listen to me. We fought a lot those days. Anyway, he didn’t come home that night and I was a wreck. I called every home in the village, starting with Ibraheem’s. His mother told me that her son wasn’t home either and she was starting to worry. If Ibraheem’s father came home and he was still out, there’d be hell to pay and she would have to pay it.”

Layla imagined a tall, dark man yelling at his wife for the actions of a young man she was powerless to control.

“By the next morning, Hamzeh wasn’t home. We waited to whole day and nothing. A week passed. Nothing. A month passed. Nothing. Half a year passed. Nothing.”

Here, Teta Basima paused again. This time she did not sigh or take a sip of coffee. She just stopped speaking. Huda looked down at her hands. Remembering.

“Finally, after almost an entire year, we got a phone call. A man named Muhammed told us he was friends with Hamzeh and would like to come to speak with us. I asked him again and again to tell me where Hamzeh was, but he refused. He made me wait. I gave him our address and he arrived the next day, holding a small envelope.

I could tell immediately Muhammed was a fighter. He was a tall man, built heavy, like a tank. It was hard to imagine that he was friends with a fifteen year old high schooler. I knew something wasn’t right. I could sense that he was from somewhere else, his accent was slightly tinged. He was from way up north, Jenin probably. He took his time speaking, thanking me for meeting with him. I let him inside.

We sat down in the living room and I asked him to get to the point, to tell me where

Hamzeh was. He hesitated, then handed me the envelope he held in his hand. ‘This will explain everything,’ he said. I could tell he was uncomfortable sitting my house, knowing my husband was dead and my neighbors were all probably taking note. He didn’t want to cause a scandal. I tore open the letter. Inside was a scrawled note in Hamzeh’s handwriting. It said:

Teta, my dearest, I have joined the rebellion. Do not ask me to come back to school. Tell Mama I love her. I love you, too.

Or something like that, I don’t remember. I just knew he wasn’t coming back. Something in the way he wrote the words made me sure of it. I lost it. I don’t remember much, but I do remember screaming at Muhammed. I blamed him for clouding my grandson’s mind, for stealing him from his family. I remember Muhammed didn’t fight back. He just stood there, silently soaking in my words without a sign that he was even moved by them.

When I was finished with my yelling, he stood up, thanked me, said he was deeply sorry for any pain I felt, and left. It was as if he was reading a script. He must have said it a million times before to other mothers. He was used to it.”

Teta Basima stopped talking again. Tears had begun to form in the corners of her eyes, she let them fall, but moved the tray of bread out of the way this time. She took a while to speak again.

“Well, what happened?” Layla addressed this to Huda, who had her arms propped on the table, cradling her jaw with her hands.

Huda touched Teta Basima’s shoulder and said, “*Mama, kamly.*” Urging her to continue with the story.

Teta Basima took another deep breath and continued.

“Hamzeh was lost to us by then. Widad went crazy, she came back to Burqa. Even your dad came back from Texas to help search for him. But, we never found him again. We had to hear it on the news that he died. The bastards convinced him to strap a bomb to his waist and stand next to a crowd of Israelis on the streets of Tel Aviv.”

She let out a deep, sharp sigh.

“We never got his body back. We buried an empty coffin draped in the Palestinian flag...they said he was scattered everywhere. *Feta-feet*, like this damn bread!”

Teta Basima pushed aside the tray of shredded bread and stood up. Layla knew the story and the conversation were finished. She looked at her Aunt Huda, who had returned her hands to cradle her jaw, staring blankly at the tray of bread. They said nothing. Teta Basima put on another pot of coffee.

Summer passed slowly, uneventfully, without much more than heat and a couple village weddings. Layla and her grandmother returned to their broken speech, the constant dance of embarrassment and discomfort that comes with gaps in language. However, Teta Basima let Layla help her with her plants, every now and then. She sat with Layla at the table while she wrote down all her recipes in neat handwriting, Huda translated them to Arabic. By the end of the summer, they had a whole cookbook; but Layla did not include the recipe for *fetat hummus*. Her grandmother seemed grateful for this, “*ahsan y’dul el-kitaab hek*,” she said, “it’s better the book stays this way.”

Layla returned to El Paso at the end of June. When she arrived, her Sunset Heights apartment had a fishy smell to it. Her landlord must have turned on the central swamp cooler

while she was away. Wrinkling her nose, she set her bags down and went to the kitchen to make sage tea.

Her small, white kitchen felt hollow. There was no radio, no steaming pot on the stove, no fresh baked pita bread on the counter. For the first time, she felt her small apartment was a gaping cave, vast and empty, needing to be filled. She tried to ignore the feeling as she drank her tea.

Jetlagged and restless, Layla didn't sleep at all during the night. She was awake at dawn. She half-expected to hear Fareed's wheezing crow, but was only met with the humming of swivel fan of her windowsill. She stood up, decided to go for a walk.

She walked downtown as the blue dustiness began to shake itself from the buildings and streets. Still feeling the effects of the fourteen hour plane trip, she felt floaty as she walked. The city had just begun to wake up. She had forgotten it was a Tuesday, people were starting their work day already.

Layla stopped by a bakery downtown, the smell of cinnamon and vanilla wafted out onto the street. She stepped inside, ordered a cinnamon roll and some coffee and took a seat. People began to filter in, ordering donuts and pastries before work.

Layla watched as a woman and a young boy walked up to the counter. The boy looked about ten, the age Hamzeh would have been when he started living with Teta Basima. The woman ordered some sweet bread for herself and her son. They sat at the table in front of Layla.

The woman was talking in Spanish to a friend she met at the bakery. The boy sat next to her, quietly staring at his sweet bread. The woman leaned over him, pushing the pastry closet to him, told him to eat up. The boy nodded, silent.

He picked up the sweet bread, its sugar icing crumbling under his fingers and began to break it a part, piece by piece. His fingers were caked in pink icing, crumbs stuck up underneath his fingernails, but he continued to shred. When he was finished, he lifted his hands up over the pile of shredded bread and stared at them.

Layla became aware that she was staring at his hands, too. The boy seemed notice this, and looked up.

They looked at each other from across the table. Neither of them said a word.



***June 1, 2014***

*This might be the last time I see Teta Basima. I want to know more about her, but she is getting older and I still can't speak to her. The words I want to say knock against my teeth, caged by my gums. Whenever I try to speak to her, I feel like I'm about to jump into a giant, black pool. She stares at me as I fumble around with my Arabic. She looks embarrassed for me. If my aunt is in the room, she tries to help. She almost always gets it wrong. Something I say doesn't translate, confuses them both. In the end, the conversation halts like a snuffed out candle. No one speaks in the kitchen. Then. Her voice breaks the silence. "Layla," Teta says, "what have you eaten? Are you hungry?" No matter how I answer, she feeds me. Aunt Hoda makes tea and I get a plate of whatever is in the oven or on the stove. We sit. I eat. They drink. When we are finished, I thank her in the Arabic I was taught to parrot when I was kid, Arabic that rolls off my tongue smooth and full.*

*My life is a cracked screen, full of little holes my memories fall through. Cousins try to fill in the gaps with stories. In English, they tell me everything in the summer over coffee and hookah, but family history, like idioms, doesn't always translate. Entire plot lines are garbled by inattention or neglect. Names are forgotten or misheard. Stories devolve into petty gossip. Too eager to unveil the punch line or the scandal, the tellers forget to be careful, to thread the strings between the characters in family quilt of memories properly. In the end, I am left with an assortment of patches basted together with insecure strings, feebly holding on to one another like ancient buoys on a rough sea.*

*Often, a string breaks and a patch of memories is sucked away. For a time, it floats on the*

*surface, like a forgotten word floats on the tip of the tongue, buffeted by waves, waiting to be rescued by another thread from someone else's story - a recalled name, a remembered place, a reanimated feeling. The hacked off memory floats like that for ages, until its absence is forgotten, too. The quilt moves on, the hollow square an empty, black hole.*

*I am so tired of stories people tell. I wish I could just be in the memories and float through them uninterrupted. I wish the memories could be film played in a theater. The lights dim, the movie begins and you're in.*

*I want to be in full color. Arabic. No subtitles.*

## **Daud and the Muskrat**

Daud stood still, pinned to the crumbling wall behind him. He stared into the barrel of the assault rifle pointed at his chest. Daud's eyes followed the path of black that connected his eyes to the soldier's. He looked into the swirls of hazel that surrounded the soldier's narrow irises, they glowed like tiny nebulae. The hazel reminded Daud of the first time he traveled to the United States and his cousin, Layla, took him to the McDonald Observatory to watch the stars. They sat on long benches made of rock and looked straight up while a guide talked and pointed into the black sky with a high-powered, green laser. The green light of the laser pierced through the black curtain of space and made paths into the heavens. Daud followed the green path into the deep, velvet black and imagined he was one of those lonely planets. Drifting about in the vast silence, floating through time.

He was Jupiter, with swirls of orange and cream gas swishing about on his belly, tickling the ammonia crystals that clustered underneath the gaseous clouds. He swayed in space, suspended in the pool of black. In space, he thought about the people down on Earth. He watched the clouds swirl over the blue of the oceans. He saw rain wash down over his uncle's house in El Paso, Texas. Big droplets beat down on the brown shingles and rushed through the gutters, creating currents that ran like little rivers into the concrete. A muskrat was caught in the swimming pool, swimming against the rushing current of the rain, flapping its webbed paws through the chlorinated water. The muskrat swam and swam while Daud watched from space. She pushed up against the aquamarine pool tiles, gulping for air. The water rushed over her back and swirled the orange fur of her belly. Daud could smell the chlorine of the pool and the murky smell of the river the muskrat brought with her.

Daud saw water flow into her snout, he saw water blind her eyes. Her claws scratched at the glazed tiles, searching for a way out of the pool as water filled her belly. Her clawing slowed and the water took over. Her paws stopped moving and swirled in a circle with the rushing current. The water rolled her over on her back. Her belly was round, the color of orange and cream. The water tickled the soft pink skin under her fur.

She swayed in space, suspended in the pool of blue. On her back, she looked up into space. Her eyes followed the dotted trails of raindrops that led into the flat, grey clouds. She thought about the Milky Way and of Jupiter. She felt the gaseous clouds with her webbed paws. She imagined she was a lonely planet, floating through space and time. She was Jupiter, pushed up against the vastness of space. From space, she peered down on to the clouds swirling around the Earth's blue oceans. She saw the alleyway in Jerusalem where Daud and the soldier were facing each other. She felt the grainy sand that covered the crumbling wall behind Daud, she saw the sweat that streamed down the back of his neck. Daud stood still, his back against the wall. A rock burned through his palm. The muskrat saw the soldier shift his weight to his right leg. She heard Daud's heavy breath, felt the heat rising up from the soldier's hands.

She saw the soldier's fingers waver above the trigger. She heard the faint pull of metal as he pulled the trigger back. She saw Daud scratching through the dust on the floor. Saw him swim and swim against the current of blood that flowed beneath him. She saw the soldier roll Daud over on his back, currents of red swirled over his belly. She smelled the dust of the floor and the iron in his blood. She saw the clouds of dust that covered him. She saw the dust that settled into the corners of his open eyes. She saw the swirls of green that surrounded the black holes of his irises. The swirls were flecked with gold and red, they looked like tiny nebulae.

## **The Tonsil Stone**

The morning she coughed up another tonsil stone, Dalia woke up to her father's coughs echoing down the hall. They traveled through his chest, metallic and hollow, filling her bedroom with noise. She put a pillow over her head and turned to her side, trying to get back to sleep. She tried to think of a time when her father wasn't sick, before the emphysema took residence in his lungs. She couldn't. Feeling a tickle begin in her throat, she stared at the digital clock on the wall. With each second, she imagined the ticking sound the clock lacked, timing her father's coughs to the make-believe beat. Four o'clock turned to seven and Dalia had to get up to get ready for school.

In the bathroom, the cold of the tile floor seeped up through her slippers, coating the bottoms of her feet like sleet coats asphalt with black ice. Winter was bitter in Nablus, but this one was the worst she could ever remember. She wondered if the shallow air helped her father's cough at all. She could still hear it floating through the house, although it sounded weaker when it filtered through the thin morning air. Dalia brushed her teeth, she could taste metal in the water. The water that ran through the pipes was stored in a tank at the top of the apartment building. Every week a truck drove through the neighborhood and filled the tank up. Dalia liked to watch the men who pumped the water. She studied their faces, all of them squinty-eyed, perpetual cigarettes dangling from the sides of their mouths, their faces walls that hid their inner thoughts. She wondered if they could hear her father coughing or if they had fathers that coughed, too. Maybe they'd smoke a little less, she thought.

Dalia walked back through the hall to her bedroom, her slippers softly padding on the floor. She stopped in front of her parent's bedroom. The open door felt like the mouth of a cave,

deep and dark. The shutters were mostly closed, leaving only thin strips of blue morning light to peek through in between the slats. Her father, a huge mound on the bed, wheezed in between coughs. Dalia wondered if the piles of thick blankets her mother had stacked on top of her father were weighing down his lungs, making it even harder for him to breathe. She wanted to peel back each layer of thickness and find her father underneath. She imagined what he would look like, small and bony, a newborn child. She wished she could peel back the layers of tar that soaked the walls of his lungs like lead paint.

“Good morning, Baba.” Dalia whispered, holding her breath for the response. She didn’t know why she said that, she hadn’t spoken to her father in weeks. Not since he became confined to his bed. *Please don’t answer*, she thought, *please*.

Her father wheezed and let out a string of thick coughs, hacking and shuddering under the covers. Dalia hesitated at the door of the bedroom, her hand holding the door jam, as if readying to propel herself forward in to the abyss. She didn’t move. She felt rooted to the spot, her cold feet anchoring her to the tile of the hallway. Her throat felt hard, as if she had swallowed a giant, scratchy hair ball.

“Out of the way!” Her mother pushed Dalia away from the door, carrying a mug of hot tea. “*Habeeby*, I’m back,” her mother whispered to her father over his coughs, patting the mound of blankets on his chest. “It’s okay, it’s okay, I’m here.”

Dalia stood by the door, watching them. Her mother ran a washcloth over her father’s forehead, whispering *bismillah* over and over. Her father continued to shudder and hack. He sounded like a water logged engine, sputtering, stopping and starting. Dalia watched and wished she felt more. She turned and went to her bedroom.

The blue light of the morning washed away by the time Dalia walked into the kitchen to eat. She found her mother sitting at the plastic table, sipping coffee and reading *Qur'an*.

"Morning," Dalia said as she walked in. Her throat still felt scratchy and her words were hoarse. She made her way to the fridge, grabbing the *labneh*. Her mother looked up at her, mouthing the final words of the *surah* she was reading.

"Good morning, love." Her mother sighed, taking off her reading glasses and setting them on the table. She smoothed the gray hair at her temples, sitting up to get out of her chair. "Let me make you something to eat."

"No, no, Mama. Don't. I'll just take a labneh sandwich."

"That's not enough, Dalia! Let me fry up some eggs."

"No. I don't want eggs. Just stop, Mama." Dalia couldn't help but feel annoyed. Her mother barely ate anything for herself anymore, she was always taking care of her father. She remembered a time when her mother was plump, before her father fell ill, before Hamzeh died. That life seemed so far away to her now. She heard her father cough and spit in his room. Her mother shook her head.

Dalia grabbed the plastic bag of pita bread from the top of the fridge, slamming down on the table. Her mother sighed again and went back to reading. The silence resumed between them, wavering like the light that peeped through the kitchen curtains. Dalia made her sandwich, grabbed her school bag and left the room. She heard her mother whispering verses as she pulled on her boots in the hall. Her father began to cough again. She walked out the front door just as she heard the scrape of her mother's plastic chair on the kitchen tile.

Nablus was wide awake and alert when Dalia stepped on to the street. She pulled her coat

closer to her neck and walked down the street toward her bus stop. The smell of gasoline fumes and cigarettes mixed in her nose along with the sounds of honking cars and shouting drivers. *No wonder Baba's lungs are shit*, she thought, *he never had a chance with this air*. The scratchiness moved to the right side of her throat, it felt like an ant digging in to her tonsil. She coughed lightly to clear her throat.

Dalia's father used to own a taxi company in the city. He had his own cab, too. Dalia remembered the cracked black leather seats, the tiny *Quran* charm that hung from the rear-view mirror. Before he became really ill, her father spent his days driving around the city, smoking packs of Gauloises Blondes and discussing politics with his many passengers. Her father started the taxi company after her eldest brother died in 1986, five years before she was born. She almost didn't live. Her mother, forty one years old and anemic, had problems all throughout the pregnancy. Dalia was born a month early, her throat choked with heavy mucus. The doctors had to slap her back hard to make her cough it out.

As a child, Dalia was sick often. A weak immune system forced her to skip school frequently and stay home with her mother. She remembered those mornings well. Her father, always late, gulping down his cup of coffee as he ran out the door to the car. Her brother, Mazen, whining about always being late to school. Her mother rolling out dough on the kitchen table to make meat and spinach pies. All of this happened while Dalia lay on the couch, coughing with some illness she had picked up from a classmate. Dalia would stay on the couch all day, listening to her mother's radio play in the kitchen and waiting for her father to get home. When he did, he always walked in slowly, so his wife wouldn't hear. He crept up to Dalia, a finger to his lips to keep her quiet, then he slipped a mint or strawberry candy into her hand with a wink. Dalia immediately gobbled up the candy, crushing the crinkly wrapper in her palm and stuffing it in to



the couch cushions. Her father would smile, knowing Dalia's mother would not be happy with the little treat just before dinner. Dalia smiled, too, happy to keep this little secret between them.

But, that was when she was little. As she grew, her father brought her mints less often. He began to take Mazen out for long drives and she stayed at home with her mother. Their conversations were forced and awkward. Every time they spoke, she felt the chasm grow between them like a hole left in a mouth after a dental extraction. That was when she coughed out her first tonsil stone.

That autumn afternoon, on the day she coughed out her first tonsil stone, Dalia was sick again. She had come down with a cold and, since her mother couldn't care for her while she worked, Dalia was allowed to drive with her father as he drove his Thursday route. Mazen had come down with jaundice while at university in New Delhi. The family had to scrape together whatever they could to send back to him. Dalia's father added more routes to his days and Dalia's mother began to work, cleaning their neighbor's apartments for a few extra shekels. When Dalia wasn't sick, her mother carted her along to the cramped apartments, to help with dusting furniture and mopping floors. Usually, she begged her father to take her along in his taxi and he normally refused. However, that afternoon, her pleading worked. She remembered pulling at his coat, a light brown spring jacket with huge front pockets. The cigarettes and lighter inside his right pocket shuffled as she pulled on it, clunking against each other like flints. Finally, he gave in.

On their drive, her father picked up passengers around the city. He carted them and their groceries around the town, talking politics with the men and sharing polite observations with the women. They drove around like this for hours. Dalia watched as they passed people by on the street and imagine what their lives were like. She imagined what it would be like to be their

daughter, what her name in a different life would be. She had never wanted to be from a different family before, but these days, with her father pulling away from her and her mother working, she felt distant. She wished she could reverse time and make it all better again.

It began to drizzle when they slowed down near a small grocery store to pick up a passenger. Dalia stopped her imagining for a moment to look at the young man.

He wore a black sweater and blue jeans. The baseball hat on his head covered his eyes, shadowing his entire face. He carried a backpack that looked full and heavy. Dalia felt uneasy, but she didn't know why. She looked at her father from the side of her eyes, he didn't seem to notice. She wanted to tell her father not to pick him up, to keep on driving, but she didn't. That was when her throat began to itch. The passenger slipped inside the taxi.

Dalia noticed the passenger was only a couple years older than her and wondered why he wasn't in school. She looked at her father again, waiting for him to make a comment, as he usually did when he ran in to kids playing hookey, but he just lit a cigarette and waited for the passenger's request.

"To Balata, please." he said with a slight nod. The words left his mouth carefully, as though he had practiced for this moment many times. She imagined the passenger in front of his bathroom mirror, saying the words over and over, watching as his tongue hit his teeth in just the right way. But, despite his practice, the passenger couldn't disguise his nerves. Dalia noticed his hands shaking in his lap.

"Sorry, I don't go that far." Her father said and turned his head to get a better look at the passenger. Dalia kept an eye on the passenger through the rear-view mirror.

The passenger lifted his head, his eyes were bright blue and shifted in their sockets. Dalia felt a pang in her stomach when she saw his eyes. Her heart began to beat a little faster, as it did

when she was in the company of a cute boy. Her unease was replaced with nervousness. She wasn't often in the presence of boys, except when her older brothers brought their friends to the house. She turned her head slightly to get a better look at the young man. This, her father noticed. He quickly clapped his fingers together and repeated his words. Dalia stared straight ahead, her hands shaking in her lap. The passenger spoke again.

"B..b..Balata Refugee Camp, please." He had not practiced for this.

"Look, son, you can take the bus to the camp. I can drop you off at the station."

"Balata, please." The passenger began to sweat despite the cold, drops forming above his lips. His hand rested lightly on the door handle of the taxi.

Her father sighed. "Look, I'm very sorry, but I—"

"To Balata. Please." The young man stared at her father, gripping the door handle with his right hand and wiping off the sweat above his lips with his free arm.

Her father sighed again and looked sideways at Dalia, shaking his head. Dalia knew he was defeated. *That didn't take long*, she thought. Her father wasn't much of a fighter, he didn't like conflict and he hated to put his foot down. It made her angry for him, now he would have to drive all the way to Balata and risk being stopped by the Israeli soldiers at a checkpoint. She wanted to yell at the young man, to tell him to get out of the car, but she kept silent as she had done before. The unspoken words curdled in her throat and it began to itch furiously. She coughed delicately to push it out of her throat, but it returned seconds later. Her father glanced at her when she coughed, then reached into his pocket for a cigarette and a lighter. Lighting the cigarette, he nodded his head, "Yes, yes, okay. Balata."

Dalia sat up in her seat, nervous. Balata had a bad reputation. The people there were sad, prone to violence, she heard. She heard that many fighters in the First and Second Intifadas came

from Balata, that there were huge groups of people who sought out martyrs, suicide bombers.

She had never been inside Balata and she was sure her father did not want to take her there. She watched him out of the corner of her eye for signs that he was nervous, too. But, her father's hands did not shake, his voice did not crack, as it usually did when something made him uneasy. He just kept smoking cigarette after cigarette, never leaving more than a second in between the end of one cigarette and the lighting of another. Dalia studied the passenger for clues. He kept his head down, his shoulders sloped and his hands in his lap. Bristly brown hair poked out from underneath his baseball cap and his clothes bore no sign as to where he was from or what he wanted with the Balata Refugee Camp. Dalia didn't know much about the place, but she did know that most of the people there came from Jaffa, a city on the coast famous for its oranges. Her father told her that the Palestinians from Jaffa still carried the keys to their old homes in their pockets, as if they could return at any moment. She wondered if the passenger carried any keys in his pockets, but he was sitting back in his seat staring at his feet.

They drove for a while, dodging large buses and pedestrians in the light, autumn rain. In Nablus, the traffic doesn't stop. It goes on, forever honking, forever shouting, the noises spiraling up from the roundabouts and filtering in to people's kitchens, living rooms and bedrooms. Sometimes, the traffic invaded Dalia's sleep becoming a soundtrack to her dreams. Everyone in the cab was silent. Dalia's father kept smoking, leaving no space in between for fresh air. Dalia cracked her window open slightly to catch her breath, but it didn't help. The wet from outside only seemed to make the smoke stronger, thicker. Her throat itching, she soaked in the smoke along with her father and the passenger. She ate a couple mints that her father kept in his taxi to abate the itchiness, but once the mints were gone the itch came back. Dalia began to

feel hot, wishing she had water to drown her throat in. She didn't ask her father for any though, afraid to make a noise while the passenger shared the cab with them.

An hour later, they reached the camp.

In her mind, Dalia thought she would see a clear separation between the camp and the city, but they only blended into each other like tea blends with evaporated milk. The buildings looked like regular buildings, except that more laundry hung from wires on balconies and the windows fogged up from the heat of the bodies inside. Nablus was crowded, but Balata was packed with people. She had overheard her father talking about Balata once, saying that he knew a family who grew up there when he was a kid, that they thought they'd only be there a few months but ended up staying there for years. That was the case for all the families in Balata. A temporary solution turned into a permanent nightmare; they would live out their days carrying keys to houses they would never use again.

The passenger sat up in his seat and began to tap on the arm rest of the car door. Lightly at first, but then more insistent, as if he were trying to make up his mind about something. Dalia watched him from the rear view, noticing the beads of sweat that had gathered again above his lips. The passenger licked his lips and began to jog his legs in his seat. This nervous action made Dalia's throat itch even more. She opened and closed her mouth to try and squeeze the itch out, but nothing worked. Dalia looked at her father to see if he noticed the passenger's nervous fussing, but he just kept smoking and staring straight ahead.

"Here," the passenger said, his voice cracking from disuse. He gave a small cough and swallowed his spit to clear his throat.

Her father slowed down in front of a decrepit apartment building. The outside stones were grey and cracking. Dalia saw the faded posters of teenaged martyrs plastered on the metal

doors of the entrance to the building. She tried counting them all, but gave up when she realized that posters had been plastered over older posters and that they were all tearing away and fading, the names of the martyrs blurring with time. The passenger fumbled with his wallet, his hands were shaking, his knuckles white.

The posters reminded Dalia of her brother, Hamzeh, who died in 1986, before she was born. She didn't know much about him, but she knew his death was strange. Her parents never spoke about it. She knew her father and mother had travelled to Amman to be with his father, her grandfather, who was dying of liver cancer. Hamzeh, their first son, stayed behind in Burqa with Teta Basima, her maternal grandmother. Her parents did not expect to be away for a long time, her grandfather was only expected to live for a few months, but complications with inheritances arose after he died. Her parents stayed in Amman for two years trying to solve the issues. When they came back, they had no money and no son.

Finally, he found the correct amount for the fare and stuffed into her father's outstretched hand. Her father, who usually accepted the fares without even turning around to look at passengers, turned sideways in his seat and held on to the passengers fingers. He looked him in the eyes. Something strange was happening. Dalia was jerked from her memories and into the cab. She was suddenly aware of her itching throat again as she watched her father.

"You don't have to do this." Her father said in a firm whisper, as though he didn't want Dalia to hear.

The passenger stared back at her father, his face stony and cold.

Her father, insistent, held on to the young man's fingers, daring him to let go. Dalia had never seen her father's eyes so intense, so determined. He usually avoided eye contact with people and let his mouth do all the talking.

“Please, you don’t have to do this.” Her father said again, never letting go of the young man’s fingers.

The passenger’s upper lip was dotted with sweat, his head bent so Dalia couldn’t see his eyes. He began to shake.

Incoherent words tumbled out of his throat along with heavy sobs. The young man slumped in his seat, his body wet with a mixture of tears and anxious sweat.

“You have no idea,” the passenger managed to say, stringing the words together in between silent heaves of his chest. “You have no clue.”

The passenger wriggled his fingers out of her father’s grip and swung the door wide open, propelling himself toward the metal doors of the building. Her father shouted, unbuckled himself and ran after the young man.

Dalia shouted at her father to come back to the taxi, but he flew after the young man and toward the gray building. Dalia put her hand on the door handle, about to open it and follow her father. Something held her back. She felt rooted to the seat, unable to move, paralyzed by her fear. Her throat throbbed with itchiness, like a beetle was burrowing inside her right tonsil. She coughed violently to get the itch out.

The rain tapped gently on the windshield and boys with dusty faces gathered around the parked taxi. They peered in through the windows, asking Dalia for spare change or gum. She locked the doors and tried to ignore them, wishing her father would come back. The sun began to sink behind the skyline of jagged buildings and Dalia started to shiver. Most of the boys had lost interest in Dalia and the taxi, but the remaining few entertained themselves by breathing hot air onto the glass of the windows and writing obscenities in the fog.

Dalia sat in the taxi, overcome by coughing. She did everything to get rid of the itch. She

once heard of a young girl who was so allergic to smoke that it killed her. She worried that she might be developing a smoke allergy from all the exposure. All the coughing made her throat feel tight, as if it was closing up. She gasped for air and pulled at her throat to stop the itch and breathe easily. Nothing worked.

More minutes passed and Dalia became more frantic. By now, only a couple boys still guarded the taxi, waiting for a chance to collect change from its returning driver. They sat hunched over on a low wall close by. Dalia ate through all the mints in the taxi and searched desperately for something else to help her get rid of the itch. She found a toothbrush in the glove compartment and used it to scratch at the back of her throat. The toothbrush made her gag. She felt even sicker. Finally, her dad returned. Dalia was worried he would have to take her to the doctor, which she hated, so she tried to disguise her cough.

Her father limped over to the car, shooing away the stragglers from the group of boys by stuffing coins into their little hands. Her opened the taxi door and got into the driver's seat, not once looking at Dalia. His face was red and he had a mark on his right cheek, a semi-circle of red that looked like the imprint of a fist. Dalia wanted to ask him what happened, to ask him if he was all right, but she was overcome with nervousness and fear. She kept silent, the itch burrowing deeper into her tonsil.

In the dark, it was difficult to find a way out of the camp. They drove around trying to find the street they came in on, the one that would lead them back to Nablus. Dalia's father didn't say anything and Dalia began to feel claustrophobic and hot. Her throat itched furiously still and she didn't have mints or water to wash it down. Then, she began to cough the kind of cough that makes it impossible to get a breath in between hacks.

Her father stopped the car.



“Dalia, *habeebty*, what’s wrong?”

Dalia couldn’t answer through her coughs.

Panicky, her father patted her at the top of her back. “Just breathe. Breath, Dalia,” he said.

Dalia hunched over in her seat, coughing and spitting up mucus filled saliva. She felt something welling up in her right tonsil. It felt like a small tumor being pushed out in to her mouth. Her hand over her mouth, she forced a final cough out of her tired throat.

She felt a wet, gooeyness in her palm. Sitting back, her palm upturned, she looked at what had just come out of her mouth. A small, yellow ball of mass lay in a pool of spit in her hand. The smell took over the smell of stale smoke in the car. It smelled like rot, like the smell of the butcher’s back room where the inedible cuts of meat were dumped.

They looked at each other in silence. Dalia looked at her palm. The ball of mass smelled so rotten, she thought a piece of her was rotten, too. Her heart panged with panic. Was her body falling apart from the inside? She began to cry.

“Baba! Am I dying?” She sobbed, fear replacing the itchiness in her throat.

Her hand still upturned, her whole body shook with her sobs.

Her father didn’t say anything. She looked over at him and he was shaking. It looked like he was crying, too. That scared her even more. She sobbed harder.

Then, she heard it. Her father’s laughter.

He laughed so hard he snorted, clapping his hands together and wiping away tears that rolled down his cheeks.

His laugh startled her out of her sobs.

“What?” she asked, “Why are you laughing? This is serious.”

He shook his head and sighed. "Dalia, my sweetheart, my moon. You're not dying. That's only a tonsil stone!"

"A tonsil stone?"

"Yes, my heart, I used to get them all the time when I was a kid. Food gets stuck in your tonsils over time and hardens. They usually wash away when you swallow or brush your teeth, but, if you're like me, your tonsils hold on to the masses as if they are children. It's nothing to worry about."

Dalia looked at her palm. The yellow, slimy mass glistened in its pool of saliva like a pearl.

"I made a stone in my throat?" she asked and began to laugh, too. Her father, still laughing, handed her a tissue. They drove home listening to the radio. Dalia felt almost normal again, as if the chasm between them never erupted. They didn't tell her mother about the camp or her father's marked cheek or the tonsil stone. They kept it to themselves, a pearl of a secret.

Three years later, and Dalia never asked or learned from her father what happened that late afternoon in the gray building. She sensed it had something to do with the posters of the martyrs on the walls outside. Something to do with Hamzeh. But, she would never be sure. As the years passed, she and her father continued to grow apart, despite their shared secret of the passenger and the tonsil stone. She knew things would be different if she were a boy, like Mazen. But, there was nothing she could do about it, so she kept quiet.

She passed a huge mural of Yasser Arafat painted on the wall of an apartment building courtyard. At the corner of the mural, Handala, the refugee boy, stood with his back to the world. Dalia wondered if he came from the Balata Refugee Camp. Dalia suddenly became aware of how

scratchy her throat had become. She swallowed her spit to try and make the scratchiness go away, but it only receded for a moment and came back stronger.

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Dalia's throat still felt like sawdust a few days later. If this was another tonsil stone, it had to be a big one. Usually, they passed after just a day or two. This one seemed to hang on in her throat like a parasite. Her father still lay in his bed, the mound of his body heaving up and down, an ancient whale in a sea of heavy quilts. Every morning, she walked up to his door and peeked in on him, but her feet stopped at the threshold of his bedroom each time. Her mother had taken to reading her Quran at the foot of her father's bed. On the mornings when she felt the sun warm enough to open the shutters, Dalia walked by the room and saw her at the end of the bed, rays of golden light and dust particles circling her, enveloping her like a mist. This morning her father's room was dark. Her mother sat in her plastic lawn chair whispering verses out of the corner of her mouth, nodding her head as if in agreement with God. Dalia looked in, but didn't say good morning. She walked down the hall.

In the bathroom, Dalia pulled at her throat. The itch pulsed in her left tonsil, radiating through to the side of her mouth. She hacked to try and ease the discomfort. Dalia had begun to wonder about the effects of second-hand smoke on children of smokers, could tonsil stones be caused by smoke exposure? She remembered having read a newspaper article about it when she was in middle school. Her father used to smoke cigarettes in the living room every morning while he drank his coffee and read the paper. Dalia remembered him sitting in his armchair that morning, shuffling the paper in front of his face, a wispy line of thin smoke trailing out from behind the comic strips. She imagined the thin line of smoke felt like a spider web spinning out from the tip of his cigarette. When he sucked in the smoke, she imagined the web filling his

lungs, tangling up inside the deep cavities, mixing with the web of arteries inside, clogging him up with cobwebs. She felt as though the cobwebs had transferred into her throat, their little spiders burrowing into the sides of her cheeks, itching away at her gums. She grabbed her dry toothbrush from the side of the sink and brushed at the back of her throat.

Dalia heard a soft knock on the bathroom door. She stopped brushing for a second and waited.

“Dalia?” Her mother’s voice poked through the metal bathroom door. Dalia’s back stiffened. She didn’t answer for a few seconds.

“Dalia? You in there?”

“Yes.”

“Dalia, I have to go to Umm Laith’s house. I need you to stay here with your father.”

A pang flashed through Dalia. She turned and flung the door open. Her mother stood at the mirror in the hallway fixing her headscarf.

“Wait. Why? Can’t I go for you?” Dalia hated going to Umm Laith’s house, but she’d do anything to avoid being at home alone with her father.

“No, Umm Laith wants me to meet her cousin’s sister’s brother-in-law. He’s a lung doctor, you know, a pul- a pulmo- well, whatever, he knows a lot about lungs. Umm Laith says he’s the best in all of Jordan. I’ve got to go now because he’s leaving for Amman in a couple of hours.”

“Well, can’t I go with you?” She coughed and pulled at her throat. “Please?”

“No, Dalia. You can’t leave your father alone.”

“But, mama, - ahem - please. Dad’ll be fine. Let me-”

“No, Dalia. That’s enough. You’re staying.”

Her mother pulled a wool shawl over her shoulders and grabbed her purse from the hallway closet. The itch in Dalia's throat throbbed again.

"I'll be back in two hours. Call Umm Laith's house if you need anything. There's soup on the stove, keep the gas low and stir it every 15 minutes 'til I get back."

Dalia stood in the doorway of the bathroom and watched her mother walk down the hall to the front door of their apartment. She looked down at the toothbrush she held in her hand; the bristles were pink with blood. She swallowed her spit to stop the itch.

Dali hid in the kitchen drinking cups of tea while her mother was out. She stirred the pot of lentil soup and listened to the news on the radio. *-Residents of the Balata Refugee Camp say the IDF had arrested four residents, – the reporter's voice oozed out from the speaker, smooth, soft, bored - one of whom was wounded in the raid.* Her father's coughing floated into the room, mixing in with the sounds of the radio. Another reporter was on scene interviewing a resident of Balata, his voice came out fast and winded. *-We don't want the Palestinian Authority to take care of this. Balata can take care of itself-* he sounded pained, like his tooth ached. The winded reporter sounded bored, too. He kept saying "ah, ah, ah," while the resident spoke. Dalia imagined him nodding his head with every word, a strained smile eking past his thin lips. Another heavy cough pushed through from her father's bedroom into the kitchen. Dalia thought about getting up from the table to check on him, but moved to stir the soup instead.

She stirred the soup two more times before she realized her mother was late. She sat down at the plastic kitchen table and tapped her feet on the tile floor. The radio had switched from news to playing pop music. The auto-tuned voice of the singer stuck to the walls of the kitchen, coating everything in sweet. Dalia felt sick and turned off the radio. In the silence, the

clock on the wall felt enormous. Her father's cough rang out from his room, each one getting thicker, heavier, louder. Dalia felt the itch on the side of throat throb as if it were growing, a tumor inside her cheek. She turned off the burner under the soup and went to the bathroom.

She stared at herself in the mirror. Her eyes sunken, the skin on her forehead dry and flaky. She tried to look at her throat in the mirror, opening her mouth wide and titling her head to the side. She couldn't find the right angle and her tonsil kept itching. Brushing the back of her throat with a toothbrush wasn't working, her wisdom teeth kept getting in the way. She stuck her finger in her mouth to try and dig out the tonsil stone, but it only worsened. From the medicine cabinet, she pulled out a jar of Q-tips and tried to stab the itch away. Each time she pulled one out of her mouth it came out soggy, yellowed and smelling rotten, like five day old fish. She kept at it.

Dalia dug the Q-tips into her tonsils, stopping every now and then to check her progress. But it was hard work; she couldn't see the back of her throat using the mirror on the wall and she couldn't use her pocket mirror because she needed her hands to hold the Q-tip and her cheek open. The Q-tips she used kept getting yellower and yellower, soggy and more rotten. She had amassed a small pile of spent ones when she heard a soft knock on the bathroom door again.

"Oh, mom, you're back? Listen, I turned off the--"

The knock sounded again, still soft, but insistent. Dalia froze.

It was not her mother.

"Da-Dal-Dalia?"

Her father's voice sounded like a rusty saw, choked full of dust, unused for years.

"Are you there?" He coughed thickly, hacking up phlegm. She heard him swallow from behind the door.

“Y-y-yes, Baba. I’m here.” Dalia looked down at her pile of stinky Q-tips, her fingers covered in spit and cotton. The itch resonated in her tonsil, pulsating like a heartbeat.

“Open the door, *habibty*.” Barely a whisper, her father’s voice strained against the metal door of the bathroom.

“Yes, baba. Of course.” Her voice shook. These were the first words they had shared in a long time. Dalia felt ashamed that they were so ordinary. Dalia turned around, swallowing her spit. Her heart pumping against her lungs, she reached from the cold, metal door handle and pulled it open.

Her father stood in the hallway, his clothes floating over his limbs like smoke, as if threatening to dissolve off his body with a gust of wind or the fanning of an arm. His wrists poked out from his pajama sleeves, bony and brown. His cheekbones jutted out from under his eye sockets, making his eyes look deeper, more thoughtful. Although, when Dalia looked into them, she couldn’t tell if he was thinking about anything at all.

“Why are you out of bed, Baba?”

“Hamzeh. Hamzeh. I was looking- looking for-” Her father waved his hand around in the air, pained and slow. He let his arm drop to his side; it seemed to crash against his bony hip. He swayed in the hallway.

Dalia hadn’t heard her father speak Hamzeh’s name in years. Not since she was a little girl. She looked at him now, in the hallway. He swayed, like a wispy hair floating in breeze. His body seemed strung up like a puppet, with no sign that any muscle or bone worked on its own.

Dalia put her arm out for him to hold on to. Her heart still beat between her lungs, although it seemed to have dug deeper into her chest, as though burrowing itself away for winter.

“Come on, Baba, let’s get you to bed.” She started to walk toward him, trying to usher

him back down the hallway.

Then, her throat started to close in. She felt it getting tighter, her airways getting thinner, the tonsil getting scratchier. She stopped mid-step to cough.

Dalia coughed and coughed, her breath coming out between the coughs in short bursts. Her father stood in the hallway, mouth open, wheezing her name. He tried to put an arm around her, but his weak limbs couldn't lift her.

She doubled over, hacking and scratching at her throat. It felt violent, her throat rebelling against her body, pushing the tonsil stone out.

She kneeled on the floor, the cold of the tiles seeping through her pajama pants like water. Her throat shuddered with each cough. Her father stood over her, his eyes wide open, silently mouthing words that he couldn't say out loud.

Her throat shuddered again and she felt as though a cave were forming inside her mouth. She lifted her palm, wet with spit, to her mouth and howled into her hand, trying to dislodge the itch that had been stuck in there for days.

She gave a final cough, jutting her head into her wet palm to force the itch out.

It stopped.

Dalia kneeled on the floor, holding her palm over her mouth. The itch's absence felt like a hole in her tonsil, as if she had just been to the dentist to remove a tooth. She opened up her palm and in the center, in a pool of frothy spit, sat a hard, yellow, ball of mass. The yellow mass reeked of rotten fish and spoiled vegetables. *I made a stone in my throat*, she thought. She wanted to laugh, to pull her father down with her and see if his lungs were just full of tonsils stones, too. Dalia pulled at her throat, the itch finally gone and looked up at her father.



She stared up at him, his mouth was still open. He wheezed with each breath. She wondered if he remembered that winter in Balata, but his eyes were blank. She sank, feeling stupid and small. The years had carved out a canyon between them, a valley of silence. She sat on the cold floor of hallway, her palm upturned. She felt like sinking in to the tile.

Then, her father's shaky arm reached out to her. His wrinkled hand grabbed her outstretched one. Her spit puckered in his dry hands, the tonsil stone rolling between their palms like the pearl of an unspoken secret.

**June 5, 2014**

*Dalia doesn't understand why I care so much about writing down our stories. When I spend the night at her house, we stay up all night smoking cigarettes on the balcony while Aunt Widad sits in the kitchen reading Quran. Dalia smokes her cigarettes deeply, like she's trying to replace all the oxygen in her lungs with smoke. She laughs at the way I only hold the smoke in for a brief second, saying it's a waste of a good cigarette.*

*We don't talk about her dad. His picture hangs on the wall above the television in the living room, but we mostly ignore it when we watch movies in there. The bedroom he died in is now a guest room. I sleep in it when I visit. I imagine, if all of this had happened in the States, Aunt Widad and Dalia would have probably boarded up the room, made it into a shrine to his memory, but they have to be practical in Nablus. There's no time or space to mourn here.*

*My cousins are always practical, their brains don't have space for imagination or dreaming. That's not to say they don't dream - they do - they just dream in practical terms. They dream of having a decent house with warm water or of moving to the States and getting jobs. Real life dreaming. They always laughed at my stupid dream scenarios. Once, when we were kids, I asked them what super power they'd like to have if they could have any super power at all. It took a little time to translate what I meant by super power, but, even with clear definitions, they still answered so practically. Dalia said she'd like to time travel to meet Hamzeh. Haroun said he'd like to talk to animals so, when he became a veterinarian, they could just tell him where they hurt from. Saif said he'd like to be invisible so he could cross the border and get a job in Israel without being caught. Daud said he'd like to teleport so he could move from Texas to Jerusalem*

*without paying for airfare. I said I'd like to be able to fly. They laughed at the idea of me flying. You'd lose oxygen if you went too high, they said. You'd hit a bird, or a plane, eventually. You'd probably die. Plus, you'd look so stupid just floating in the air like that. I felt dumb, but I laughed with them. One by one, they went silent, thinking about their answers.*

*I think about that time a lot. So young, we didn't know it would be our last summer all together. That was the last time I saw Daud before he died. It was one of the last times I saw Saif before he disappeared. We spent that summer in Nablus and Burqa, playing soccer with the other neighborhood kids. That was the summer Haroun found a chameleon in the olive grove behind Teta Basima's farm and Dalia's dad started getting sick. Everything happened around us, like it was playing out in someone else's imagination. In the mornings, our parents talked quietly in the kitchen over little cups of coffee while we stirred in the next room. We didn't know it would be our last summer together. Our last summer as cousins, children in the eyes of parents.*

## Arak

### Part I

The moon was still in the sky over Petach Tikva when Saif woke up at the construction site. He turned over on his mattress and watched Mustafa's sleeping back before he rose. Yawning, he readied the kettle for coffee; lighting the small gas burner at the corner of the room. Mustafa and a few others stirred from their sleep. One by one, they rose and shuffled over to a plastic basin filled with grimy water to wash their hands and faces. Mustafa was the last to wake.

"*Sabah el-kheir*," he said, stretching out his arms. He turned as he spoke to check that Saif had already made coffee.

"Morning of light, *ya sheikh*," Saif joked, "if you had woken up any later we would have started building around you."

"*Ya zalameh*, these bastards want me to work like a donkey but they pay me like a Palestinian – screw them. I'll wake up when I feel like it."

"But, you still woke up ten minutes before Abraham usually gets here. Smart man." Saif winked at his friend. He tried to stay out of political talk here, it wasn't good for the morale of the others. Although he and the crew were paid scraps, without work permits they couldn't be picky; and it was still more than they'd make in the West Bank.

"*Y'lla*, we'd better get dressed before the big boss gets here."

Mustafa nodded, staring out of the glassless window at the moon.

The sun had begun to peek out over the tops of buildings by the time Abraham arrived at the construction site. He heaved himself out of the backseat of his BMW sedan, holding on to the door for support. He wore a dark navy suit, as he always did, no matter how much dust gathered on the hems of his trousers. The workers, who had already begun with the day's building,

stopped what they were doing to watch him.

Abraham cleared his throat and placed one hand on his round belly, poking his index and middle finger in between the buttons to stroke his belly-button as he spoke.

“Men! Listen up,” Abraham spoke in Arabic, his accent tinged by his nasal voice. “We have a lot of work to do today. The owner is arriving to see how much we’ve progressed. So, keep your lunch breaks to a maximum of five minutes.”

Mustafa groaned under his breath. Saif waved his hand at the sound, motioning for Mustafa to be quiet.

Abraham glanced over at them and turned back to remainder of the crew. “I’ve also heard of a few crew members sleeping on the job in the afternoons. This is unacceptable. Believe me, if I hear of any more of these...infractions,” he turned his head to Mustafa, “it will *not* be good.”

Mustafa stared at Abraham with a blank, almost placid, expression and yawned.

“Good! Well. I’ll be back around noon with the owner. Keep working. *Y’lla, y’lla!*”

Abraham mimicked cracking a whip, chuckling as he turned back to the car.

“Bastard.” Mustafa stared at the silver BMW as it drove away down the street.

“It’s not that bad, my friend,” Saif said, clapping Mustafa on the back. “Before you know it, *maghrib* will come and we can smoke *shisha* and drink coffee with the guys.”

“*Ya zalameh*, your endless optimism is killing me faster than Abraham’s whip.”

“*Bas*. Stop it. Come on, help me with this limestone.”

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Adam woke up to the sound of jackhammer streaming in to his bedroom from the open window.

“Dammit, *eima*. Keep my window shut!” He got out of bed to shut his window, cursing

the workers across the street for interfering with his sleep. Adam returned to his bed and grabbed his cellphone from the nightstand. The clock read nine. “Shit,” he said and ran to the bathroom to get ready for class.

His mother was in the kitchen, stirring a pot of oatmeal when Adam walked in.

“*Eima*, you left my window open. Again.” He reached for a box of Fruit Loops.

“Good thing I did, too. You’d miss class again if you hadn’t woken up.” She spoke more into the pot of oatmeal than to her son.

“Your dad will be back soon. He’d better not see you’re still here. Take my car today, go on. Get out of here.”

“But, I’m eating,” Adam motioned to his cereal.

His mother left her pot of oatmeal, grabbed an apple and shoved it into her son’s lap.

“Go.”

“Fine, fine. I’m gone.”

Adam drove past the construction site on his way to Tel Aviv University. He caught a glimpse of the grimy men at the site, their hands white with the dust of limestone and concrete.

In class, he daydreamed of what it would be like to work with his hands, to be liberated from the tedium of engineering classes, textbooks and grades. “Must be nice,” he thought, “to be your own man and not take shit from anyone.”

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*Maghrib* arrived almost suddenly for Saif. Although he didn’t pray, the lack of the *athan* to signal the late afternoon prayer threw him off his internal clock. He wondered what his mother was doing at that moment in Nablus. *She’s probably cutting up cucumbers for the fatoush salad,*

*right now*, he thought. He dreamed of her rice and potatoes in broth. His stomach began to ache.

“You hungry?” Mustafa put down the shovel he held and wiped the sweat off his forehead.

“You read my mind,” Saif answered, dusting his hands off on his pants. “Let’s eat.”

The afternoon sun spilled in through the small room where the men slept and lived. They hung makeshift curtains over the open windows to keep the harshest rays out, but this time of day, Saif always took the curtains down. He removed one of the sheets and stood in the window, feeling the sun on his face.

“Hey bozo, get over here. Asad brought groceries.” Mustafa called out to him from the corner of the room where they kept the gas burner and a few dishes.

Saif and the men prepared the food with focused silence. Cutting up cucumbers and tomatoes, spooning *hummus* and fava bean paste onto plastic plates, toasting pita bread, and boiling eggs. They ate the food just as quickly and silently as they had prepared it, stopping in between bites only to sip at their small cups of hot, sweet tea.

After they ate, most of the men, including Mustafa, went straight to sleep. Saif smoked a cigarette and watched the sun set behind the limestone buildings of the city. He smoked until it grew dark and he grew restless. When it was dark enough, he stood up, finished the rest of the tea he was drinking, and headed out to the street for a walk.

The moon hung full in the sky, pale yellow like an under-ripe lemon. Saif walked through the quiet street, listening to the distant sounds of cars and dogs barking. Petach Tikva was much quieter at night than Nablus. Saif missed the chaos of the beeping taxis, the yells of the street vendors and the smell of *shwerma* that coated every corner of the street in the summer. He

walked until he reached a small cafe. He remembered the cafes at home in Nablus. How he and his friends sat for hours playing cards, drinking coffee and smoking shisha. The cafes in Nablus were always warm and full of people laughing, talking or arguing. He missed the chaos of that, too. In a moment of nostalgic forgetfulness, he opened the door and stepped in.

The café was empty. The owner stood at the counter and two customer chatted over coffee at the back of the room. Saif suddenly became aware of how dusty his clothes and arms were. Too embarrassed to stay and too embarrassed to leave, he stood in the doorway, hesitating. The café was designed more like a Starbucks than the local shops he was used to. It reminded him of the Starbucks in Queen Alia Airport in Amman. Sterile. Pre-packaged.

“Well, are you coming in or not?” The owner snapped in Hebrew. “It’s almost shutting time.”

Saif swallowed his spit and nodded. He walked over to the counter and scanned the menu; it was all in Hebrew and English.

“I’ll have...um...one coffee?” Saif’s Hebrew was broken, but understandable.

The owner nodded and turned his back on Saif to prepare the drink. Feeling confident, Saif turned around to scan the room. He hadn’t noticed when he walked in, but there was another customer sitting by the door way. A young man, reading a large English textbook titled *Physics*.

The owner handed Saif his coffee, “fifteen *shekels*.”

Saif was stunned. “Why so high?” He spoke without thinking.

“15 *shekels*. You pay or you don’t get coffee.” The owner crossed his arms. “I don’t operate a charity and living isn’t cheap!”

Saif shook his head and felt his cheeks heat up. “Too much, I only have 10 *shekels*. I



haven't been paid yet."

The owner raised his voice as if to gather witnesses. "Not my problem. I made you coffee, you pay me. Fifteen *shekels*."

Saif looked around, wondering if he should risk a dash out of the café.

"Come on, are you stupid? I said, fifteen *shekels*, you donkey! Now, before I call the police! They'll cart your ass back to Gaza so fast you'll see stars!"

Saif began to sweat. He pulled out the ten *shekels* he had in his pocket and tried to offer them to the owner, offering to come back the next day with the remainder, but the owner just repeated his threats.

"*Bas!* I'll pay the remainder. Calm down, Ari. You old fart."

The young man with the textbook had walked over to the counter. He placed five *shekels* down and turned back to his table without looking at Saif.

The owner puffed out his red cheeks, looking down at the coins. He scooped them off the counter and motioned with his head toward Saif.

"Fine, I'll accept" he said, "now, get out of here with your coffee before I call the police." He flicked his free hand in air, shooing Saif away.

Saif picked up the paper cup full of lukewarm coffee. He looked at the young man on his way out to thank him, but his head was buried back in the textbook. Embarrassed, Saif passed him without speaking and walked back into the quiet street.

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"What do you mean, 'a Jew helped me?'" Mustafa stopped laying limestone and turned to face Saif.

Saif shrugged his shoulders and continued spreading mortar over the concrete façade of

the building.

“I don’t know, he just helped me. I was out five *shekels* and he paid the café owner for me. Come on, the mortar’s drying!”

Shaking his head, Mustafa placed the limestone and bent to pick up another one.

“I just don’t get it. A Jew. A Jew helping you like that? Did he ask you for anything after? He’ll want something for sure.”

“No, he didn’t even look at me. He was studying, I think. He didn’t talk to me at all.”

“Oh, well, that’s even worse than a Jew that thinks you can give him something. This one’s a Jew who thinks he’s better than you.”

“*Bas*, Mustafa. He was just being a decent human.”

“There’s no such thing as a decent Jew, Saif. You should know that by now.”

Saif waved off Mustafa’s words and continued spreading mortar and stone, but he couldn’t help but think about the young man. He wondered why he would help and then not speak to him. Was he motivated by decency or pride?

## Part II

“Order me a beer, yeah?” Adam said to the table as he set his backpack down on the floor and reached over the table to hug his girlfriend, Ronit. “I’m going for a smoke.”

“But you just got here!” Ronit held on to his extended arms, “Have a smoke later!”

Adam shook his arms out of her grip, “Be back in a sec, Roni.” He nodded at her friends from across the table then swerved through tables and waiters in the busy restaurant to the front entrance. Outside, he lit a cigarette and took a deep drag. Alone for a few minutes, he watched the cars speed by on the street and tried not to think about the small talk that would inevitably occur at the table when he returned. He squirmed when he thought about Ronit’s lacquered fingers squeezing his arm or how her friends would offer him short smiles in between drink orders then return to talking about all the other people they knew. He finished his cigarette and lit another one to buy himself more time.

“Hey man, bum a smoke?” A young man with a scruffy neck suddenly stood next to him.

Adam fumbled in his pockets for his pack. “Here, man.” He handed him a single cigarette.

“Lighter?”

Adam fumbled again and found the lighter in the front pocket of his jeans. He handed it to the young man, wishing he would leave.

The man lit his cigarette then stood shoulder to shoulder with Adam, staring out at the street. Adam felt uncomfortable and shifted his weight from one side of his body to the other.

“Nice night, eh?” The man took a large drag from his cigarette, moving in closer. Adam listened to the crackle, not speaking. He could feel the man looking at him, trying to make eye contact.

Adam stared straight ahead at the street. He didn't say anything for a time, until the man shrugged his shoulders and flicked his cigarette away. "Thanks," he said, hunching his shoulders. Adam turned his head slightly to watch the young man walk away. He saw him meet a couple of friends at the bar a few doors down from the restaurant and was not surprised to see the young man put his hand in the back pocket of his friend's jeans and leave it there, half-hugging his friend with the other arm. *Fags*, Adam thought and walked back to Ronit and her friends.

\*\*\*

Saif sat at the end of the bar, quietly sipping on a small glass of water with ice. He couldn't afford a beer, not until payday, but wasn't at the bar to drink. Nervous, his eyes scanned the dark room, looking to make contact with anyone else's. He had come to the bar when it opened for the first time months before, but only after he made sure no one from the construction site would ever find him there. He especially feared what Mustafa would do if he discovered him here, what he would say if he knew about Saif.

After a few minutes, a man sipping a vodka tonic nodded at Saif, his eyes motioning to the bathroom of the bar. Leaning his arms on the bar top, Saif turned his head to look around him, making sure no one else in the bar noticed him or the man. He nodded. Saif watched as the man downed his drink in one gulp, straightened out his button up shirt and walked towards the bathroom. He waited for a minute before he swallowed the rest of his water, set the cup down and followed the man into the bathroom.

They didn't say anything at first. Saif, squished up between the sink and toilet in the small bathroom, became suddenly aware of his breathing. He tried to slow his heartbeat by breathing in through his nose and out through his mouth, hoping the man wouldn't notice. And

he didn't. In fact, he seemed more concerned with Saif's shoe laces than with Saif. For a moment, Saif looked around at the small space around him. "At least this one's clean," he thought. He leaned against the tile wall.

Feeling calm, Saif watched the man; his arms shook and dewy sweat gathered around his collarbone. He noticed his hair thinned at the top, gathering at his temples in delicate swoops. He was thin, but his round stomach stuck out between the buttons of his tight shirt. He would have been better looking, even handsome, if he held himself differently. Saif felt cheated; this man showed nothing of the confidence of the man who nodded at him at the bar. This man was entirely different - nervous, shaking, weak.

"You don't have to worry, no one will find us in here." Saif was used to these bathroom meetings. He often wished he wasn't, but he knew what would happen to him if anyone found out the truth about him. He wondered if this shaking man shared his same fears.

The man did not speak; he only stood by the bathroom door, shaking.

"Cigarette?" Saif reached in to his front pocket. "My name is-"

The man cut him off. He opened his mouth to speak.

"I-I-I've never done this before, you know, but I'm not an idiot. Don't try to b-b-butter me up. T-T-Tell me how much you're charging-"

"Charging?" Saif stood up. "What do you mean 'charging?'"

"Y-y-you know," said the man, still shaking, "money." He held his hand up and signaled, "Money, *masary*, how much?" The man reached for his wallet in his back pocket, sweat dampening his armpits.

"What do you think this is?" Saif began to raise his voice, clamping his hands into hard fists. "What do you think I am?" He moved closer to the man.

They stood nose to nose, both of them shaking. The man did not say anything. Saif moved closer.

Saif abandoned his Hebrew, yelling at the man in Arabic. “You think I’m some kind of common whore? Huh? Tell me, tell me!” His anger seared through his body. He felt it pouring down his arms, pooling in his hard fists where hot sweat gathered in his palms.

“Speak!” Saif shoved the man into the door behind him. “Speak, you dog!”

The man shrank against the door, his bottom lip quivering. He opened his mouth to speak again, but no sound came out. He collapsed on the floor of the bathroom, shuddering and letting out loud sobs.

Saif stood back, still seething. “Pathetic,” he said and kicked at the sobbing man, shoving him aside to open the bathroom door.

\*\*\*

Adam lit another cigarette and scanned the darkening street. Cars full of people out for the weekend night rushed by, carrying laughter and music with them. Adam felt sour. He stared at the men outside the bar, not knowing what to do. He didn’t want to go back inside, but he didn’t want to watch the men any longer. One of the men laughed and tipped his drink up to his lips, his little finger sticking straight out. Adam curled his hand into a fist, his fingernails digging into his palm. He felt a cool hand across the back of his neck.

“Honey, we’re waiting to order inside. Come back!” Ronit slid her hand down Adam’s neck and back, sticking her hand in the back of his jeans.

Adam pulled away, yanking her hand out of his back pocket.

“Yes, yes, Roni. I’ll be right there.” He lifted his cigarette in the air and shrugged.

“Ugh, fine. Finish your *cigarette*.” Ronit shook her head, her curly hair fanning out

around her face. She smiled, but Adam could see she felt deflated. In the yellow light of the street, Adam thought she looked good, even pretty. He felt sorry and pulled in to kiss her on the cheek, but she clacked her gum and held her hands out to keep him away.

“Just come inside, okay?”

Adam nodded. Ronit turned and walked away, looking much smaller and more fragile than she looked inside at the table with her gossiping friends.

Ronit back inside, Adam puffed down the last of his second cigarette. The tip flaming up angrily. The three men outside the bar sat at the patio tables, but Adam could see some movement inside the bar. He leaned forward to get a better view.

A man in a yellow button down pushed through the crowded tables, shoving people aside and causing a few to spill drinks in the process. A table yelled out at him, but he didn't seem phased. He pushed through the glass doors of the bar. Startled, the three men at the patio table jumped up. One of them squealed loudly. The angry man didn't seem to notice this either and plowed through the patio tables outside, too. He stormed down the street towards Adam.

Adam felt glued to the sidewalk. He felt a sharp excitement run through his chest as he watched the man get closer and closer. He had the same feeling he usually got on the soccer field, guarding a goal. They were the only two people on the sidewalk, the angry man hurtling toward Adam like a mad comet. Adam could feel the immense energy coming off of the man; he felt strangely drawn to him, as if his center of gravity had shifted because of the man's presence. The man was close enough for Adam to smell his thick, sweet sweat that rolled off his temples in fat globs. Adam stood in the center of the sidewalk, his feet firmly planted to the concrete, but the man didn't seem to notice him. Adam realized that the man was not going to stop, but he was

ready for a fight. The man shoved past him, almost knocking him off his feet.

“Asshole!” Adam yelled after the man. His hands rolled into fists again, the old fingernail grooves in his palms stung as they reopened.

The man threw his hand back angrily, slowing his steps. He stopped after a few seconds and turned around. His shoulders heaved and he opened and closed his fists, readying for a punch. He looked up.

“Back off, man.” He started to say. His eyes reached Adam’s. Suddenly, his shoulders stopped heaving. He froze.

Adam recognized him, too, but he couldn’t remember where they had last seen each other. The man’s dusty, paint stained shoes seemed out of place with his yellow shirt and dark washed jeans. Adam looked at him, puzzled. His desire to fight the angry man dissolved and was replaced by questions and interest.

The man seemed to be asking a million silent questions as he stood in the middle of sidewalk, his fists clenching and unclenching.

The two men stood frozen in time on the sidewalk. Adam felt even more drawn to the man, as if his energy was pulling him closer and closer. He moved forward, his hand out, toward the man.

The man shrank back slightly, as if expecting Adam to throw a punch. His anger melted off his face, pooling and disappearing behind his watery eyes.

“What’s your name?” Adam asked, hoping for something to remind him of where he had met the man.

Before he could answer, police sirens sounded all over the street. Adam saw a crowd of people had gathered around the bar; huddled around a tall, slightly built man who sobbed into a



handful of tissues. He looked back at the angry man, who was running away. He watched him run down the street and disappear into a dark side street.

Before Adam stepped back into the busy restaurant, he glanced at the sobbing man who was speaking to the police through snot and heavy breaths. He thought of the man who slipped into the dark streets – who was he? where had he seen him before?

### Part III

For weeks after the incident at the bar, Saif did not dare step out into the streets of Petak Tikva. He kept to the construction site, burying himself in laying tile or wiring the rooms, often working long after the other men had quit. He was sure the police were still looking for him, sure that the man he left sobbing in the bathroom had not forgotten what his face looked like. He avoided the other men, making a great effort to wake up before they did and go to sleep as soon as he finished eating dinner. He and Mustafa barely spoke, sharing words sparsely as they slathered mortar on the floors and aligned the large, square floor tiles for the apartments. Saif was sure Mustafa knew something was wrong, he was certain that Mustafa would find out the police were looking for him. But Mustafa never let on. He remained silent when Saif woke up early in the mornings, and did not say a word when Saif quietly let the others after eating and slipped into his mattress each night. If Mustafa knew, he did not speak to Saif about it.

Despite Mustafa's silence, Saif lived in the fear that he would be discovered. He worried constantly about what the other men would say if they found out. All day while he worked, he imagined the situations in which the other men uncovered his secret. In his mind, there were only two choices: run away or deny guilt. Both options, he knew, were next to impossible. Almost as impossible as his run in with the handsome stranger who had paid for his coffee in that small, empty café so many weeks before.

Saif thought about that man often. He wondered if that man ever thought of him. He remembered the way the man looked at him as he rushed down the street the night after the bar. His eyes, deep set and bright, flashed with interest and confusion. Saif was certain the man remembered him. He felt a strange feeling in his stomach when he remembered how his voice

sounded, thick and shuddery, like his voice had been shorn from his throat by a peeler. He wanted to hear that voice again, to ask the man his name and share his own. But he was struck with fear every time that thought crept into his mind – he still did not know why the man suddenly took an interest in him. The night at the coffee shop, he had been so cold, unspeaking. Could he have discovered that Saif had no papers? Could he want something in return for the price of a cup of coffee? But, why now, after so many weeks?

Saif worked through the days with these thoughts constantly swirling around in his mind, filling up his stomach and lungs with dread. Consumed by all his secrets, he felt like he was silently drowning.

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Adam found it difficult to focus after that night on the street. He spent many days driving slowly past the bar, as if the man would suddenly appear from the alley and climb in to the passenger's seat with him. Most days, Adam tried not to think about the man. Every time he did think of him, a strange sensation slipped through his stomach, as if a ball of glue dripped down his throat and coated his insides, making them thick and gooey. He felt almost paralyzed by it, as if it would cement his vital organs together and make his feelings permanent, a statue.

Since that night, Adam went out with Ronit and her friends more often. He spent hours at dark tables listening to them gossip about people he didn't know, while he thought about the man he wanted to know more of. This night was not unlike many of the others; Adam, Ronit and her friends sat at a table in a nameless, crowded restaurant, while frenzied waiters swirled around them with glasses of wine and trays of appetizers.

"Did you hear what Shula did?" Gabi, one of Ronit's friends, clicked her nails on a wine glass as she spoke.

Ronit leaned forward on the table, expecting something juicy, “No, I didn’t, what happened? What did she do?”

“You won’t believe it, she got a tattoo, get this, of her grandmother’s Auschwitz number.”

“What? Is she insane? That’s so stupid.” Ronit sat back, disappointed that the news she received wasn’t as damning as she imagined it would be.

“I think it’s kinda cool,” said Frederic, one of Ronit’s art school friends. “Like, it says, I feel what you felt, you know? It’s a recognition of the pain.”

“What?” Adam, who had been staring at a waiter across the room, sat up in his seat.

Frederic, not used to Adam speaking to him directly, stammered. His words sputtered out, forming a nonsensical sentence.

“Do you think it’s ‘kinda cool’ that her grandmother was branded?” Adam’s leg shook as he spoke.

“I-I-I was only saying, I think it’s, erm, admirable that she is trying to feel her grandmother’s pain through, uh, through this tattoo. You know, a tattoo is quite painful to get. I’ve got a few myself and they’re no walk in the park.” Frederic looked around the table in a plea for support from the others, but they only looked down at the tablecloth.

“You have got to be kidding me. ‘Admirable?’ Do you have *any* idea what people went through at Auschwitz? Do you even know what real suffering is? Eh? Do you really think that one tattoo can capture the suffering of millions of people? ‘Admirable’, my ass.” Adam’s voice shook along with his leg.

Frederic didn’t respond.

“What? Can’t say anything intellectual now, Fred? Eh? Nothing to say when you are

confronted with a real-life consequence to your bullshit? Fuck this, and fuck your friend, Shula. And her stupid tattoo.”

Adam stood up, knocking Ronit’s wine glass over as he pushed the table. The wine spilled over the table cloth and dripped on to Gabi’s dress, staining both of them red. She stood up quickly, brushing at her lap. Adam didn’t stop to help her sop up the mess. He continued through the restaurant, swerving to avoid the waiters who hurtled past him to their tables. As he left, he heard Gabi say to Ronit, “What an asshole. You really need to let him go, Roni.”

Adam smiled at the thought of Ronit dumping him over a drunken text message later that night. For the first time in a while, he felt light.

Then, the thought of the strange man crept back in. He felt heavy again.

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“Come on, man, you need to talk to me some time in this century,” Mustafa said to Saif as they laid tiles in one of the apartments on the ground floor.

Saif shrugged and continued to slather cement on to the floor.

Mustafa stopped working and stared at Saif for a time, waiting for him to speak. Saif didn’t look up at him and continued his work, turning his face downward. He wished Mustafa would just go away and let him return to his tiling, but Mustafa did not start working again.

“Look at me, Saif! Come on, man. What did I do?”

The thick glue feeling slipped back into Saif’s stomach again. He hadn’t considered Mustafa at all since the incident. The hair on his arms began to prickle, a familiar response to embarrassment for him. He wished Mustafa would stop talking to him and just disappear.

“Just get back to work, Mustafa. Leave it.” Saif shook his head and reached for another tile.

Mustafa stepped on the tile as Saif pulled. “No. Tell me. Now.”

Saif knew when Mustafa had reached his limit. He understood now that anger had crept in to his friend’s chest and taken over his entire body.

“Come on, Mustafa. Let me be.” Saif finally looked up at his friend, whose hands, flecked with concrete, opened and closed in tight fists.

“Stand up. Stand up and look at me like a man. Tell me, now. What did I do?” Saif knew there was no way out of this. He couldn’t tell Mustafa the truth and he knew Mustafa too well to lie to him. Saif stood up slowly.

They were face to face with one another. Mustafa radiated heat and frustrated energy, balled up and tight. Saif seemed to hang in the air, held up by his body the way wilted flowers hang in a vase.

“Speak,” Mustafa said.

Saif suddenly felt that he was standing in front of his father. Shame crept across his back, a reminder of the time his father had walked in on him and his friend, Nabil, as they sat in his bedroom one summer afternoon when he was fifteen. He stayed silent, remembering the shouts, Nabil’s hands, and the slash of pain across his face when his father slapped him.

Mustafa moved closer. “Speak!” he shouted, his face only inches away from Saif’s. Instinctively, Saif flinched. His hand snapped back in front of his face and grazed Mustafa’s nose.

Mustafa reacted instantly. He swung his fists forward and smashed them into Saif’s head on both sides. Saif reeled with the impact; he stumbled and tripped over a box of tiles on his side. From the floor, he put his hands out to stop Mustafa, whose face was red and shiny with sweat. Mustafa loomed over Saif and began to stab at him with hard, incessant punches. Mustafa’s

hands were like balls of granite and Saif felt the air push out of him with the impact of every jab. He tried to speak, to shout, but his mouth, like a goldfish's, made circles with no sound.

Clouds of concrete dust bloomed around them. Mustafa's head was slick with sweat, his breathing labored and short. Behind the plumes of dust, Saif could make out the blurry figures of the other men from the site. The men began to shout, but Saif could not make out the words. Mustafa, exhausted by the burst of violent energy, stopped punching to catch his breath and rub his knuckles. Saif wasted no time; he snapped back up and began to push Mustafa away.

Still unspeaking, Saif shoved Mustafa hard away from him. His massive body swung back and forth, caught off balance by the sudden force of the push. Saif did not stop shoving him aside, fearing Mustafa might resume his incessant punches. Saif, like a slight bulldozer, shoved at Mustafa's unsteady body, moving him closer and closer toward the wall. The two men breathed heavily, their faces and bodies covered in concrete dust.

Saif's vision tunneled; his body moved, but he had no more control over it. He kept shoving, harder and harder, even though he saw the distance between them and the open toolbox on the floor shrink. He heaved one final time, sending Mustafa's ungainly frame reeling backward into the open toolbox full of hammers, nails, and screwdrivers.

A crack echoed through the room as the back of Mustafa's head hit the toolbox.

Saif was sucked back in to the room by the sound. He watched for minutes as the cloud of dust that billowed around Mustafa settled, leaving a fine white sheet of powder on his limp body. He stood, rooted to his spot, as the other men lifted Mustafa slowly from the floor, cradling his head like a fragile egg. Sounds became muffled again, and Saif stood, silent, watching everything happen in front of him as if it were a movie he wasn't a part of.

The men took Mustafa out of the room, leaving hollow spots in the powder where his body and their footprints once were. Suddenly, Saif was moving, but his legs were still locked. Someone had grabbed him by the neck and dragged him out of the room. Saif's hearing returned; a deluge of shouts flooded his ears.

Whoever dragged him was yelling at the other men, shouting at them to back off. The other men yelled back. Caught in the crossfire of yells, Saif didn't fight back. He tried to speak, tried to ask if Mustafa was alive, but no one answered him.

Reflecting off the white limestone, the harsh afternoon light hit his eyes. The man had dragged him into the courtyard of the building. Huffing from the strain of moving him, the man propped him up against the courtyard stairs and stepped back. Saif could see now that the man was Tarek, the construction supervisor, the only Palestinian on the crew who had his work permit. After he caught his breath, Tarek spoke.

"You have to leave."

Saif didn't respond. He turned his head slightly to see the other men crowding behind Tarek, still shouting.

Tarek crouched, his face level with Saif's. He patted Saif's cheek gently and repeated his words.

"You have to leave. Now."

Saif stared into the blinding white limestone. He suddenly felt scared, open and scarred. He looked up at Tarek, who was standing now with the other men. They had quieted and were watching Saif now, as if expecting him to give a speech.

But Saif couldn't find any words. He opened his mouth, but his throat was dry and full of concrete dust. A puff of hot, dry air escaped from his throat against his will; a subconscious plea



to remain in the building amongst his crew members, his friends. If the men heard this, they made no effort to defend him. Slowly, he stood up and dusted off his pants. He scanned the crowd of sweaty men, waiting one of them to speak on his behalf, to argue with Tarek. Instead, the men turned away from him when his eyes met theirs. He felt emptier.

Saif walked out of the courtyard without argument. He overheard the men talking about Mustafa.

“We can’t take him to a hospital. He has no papers, no money!”

“But, we can’t leave him here.”

“Someone call Ashraf. Tell him to send his cousin who owns a taxi.”

“Take him to the border and hand him off.”

“He won’t make it.”

*“Estaghfirullah.”*

“Shit.”

## Part IV

Saif walked the streets of Petak Tikva for hours. He kept to the alleyways and side streets, unsure of where to go. With no money and no phone, he didn't know how he was going to be able to back to Nablus. Could he even go back? He was the only person in his family who was making any money and his father's mounting debts weighed down on every member of their family. He thought about his sister's schooling, the medical bills his father left behind, the cost of rent, food and living. How was he going to pay for all of that now?

Consumed by these thoughts, Saif walked past the café that he had gone to so many weeks before. He was too preoccupied by these other thoughts that he didn't even think about the handsome stranger. He passed the café quickly, choosing a shady side street to walk down instead of the main road.

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Adam sat at the window of Ari's café. It was empty, as usual, and Ari stood behind the counter, tinkering with the aging espresso machine.

"Damn this thing!" Ari said, as the espresso machine sputtered out cold, chunky coffee.

Adam looked over at the old man, easing back in his seat to get a better view of the machine. He laughed, "You're going to have to pay for a new one, Ari! You can't escape the future!"

"Ah, to hell with it," said Ari, "I'm fed up with this damn café anyway. I'll just close it up."

"Oh, but where will I do my homework? Eh, my friend?"

"At home, you brat, where you belong!"

Adam shook his head, knowing the pattern of Ari's melodramatic outbursts. He turned

back to his book to continue reading, when he noticed a man walking by the café.

The man was already past the window, but Adam noticed his familiar jeans and paint stained sneakers.

Could it be the stranger?

Not waiting a second longer, Adam shot up from his seat and flew out of the café, ignoring the shouts Ari hurled at him from behind the counter.

Adam ran, almost tripping on an uneven point in the sidewalk pavement. He turned down a shady residential street, where he saw the man walking a few yards ahead.

“Hey! Wait!” Adam shouted after the man.

The man turned around. Adam saw that his face and arms were coated in a powdery substance, broken in streaks by sweat. The man began to run.

“No, stop!” Adam broke into a sprint to catch up to the man.

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Saif noticed he has entered a quiet street lined with modest apartments. He heard music emanating from the kitchen of one, accompanied by the voice of two women singing. Through the open window he could see them, rolling out dough on the counter in time to the music. His chest felt hollow. He thought of his mother and sister, wondering if there was any music playing in their kitchen as they cooked. Then, he heard a shout behind him.

Behind him, the young, handsome stranger from the café stood at the mouth of the street. Without thinking, Saif began to run. By now, running had become an automatic reaction. He wanted to get as far away from the young man as possible.

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Adam ran harder, only a few feet away from the man. He was close enough again to smell him, as he had the night he passed him on the street. The smell of his sweat was oddly sweet, thick, like the smell of bougainvillea flowers. Adam felt a strange sinking feeling in his stomach. Suddenly, doubt circled around him. “Why am I doing this?” he thought, and began to slow down. His feet slapped the asphalt as he tried to slow down.

The man, hearing his slow, turned his head while he ran. He looked back at Adam, his eyes a mixture of fear and confusion. In his distraction, he tripped on his own legs. He skidded across the asphalt and smashed into a limestone wall, his body thumping on the hard stone.

“Shit,” thought Adam, and he rushed over to help the man.

The force of the impact stunned the man. He lay on the asphalt staring at Adam, but not responding. Adam clicked his fingers in front of the man’s face.

“Hey, man. Hey, what’s your name?”

The man’s head lolled over to one side. Adam began to worry that he would become unconscious. He bent down to keep the man propped up.

“Hey, hey. Hold on. We’ll get help.”

Adam sunk down to lift the man up. He propped the man on his shoulder and walked him slowly back to Ari’s café. So close to him, he could smell cigarette smoke, concrete and the man’s sweat. The sinking feeling in Adam’s stomach returned, but welled up backwards into his throat.

They reached the café and entered. Inside, Ari was still tinkering with the espresso machine and cursing. Adam pushed aside his backpack on the seat at his table and eased the man into the chair. He handed him a half empty cup of coffee, now cold.

Adam watched the man take a sip, waiting for a chance to ask him his name.

“Are you feeling okay?” He asked in Hebrew.

The man nodded.

“What’s your name? Where are you from? Why do I remember you?” Adam spat off questions quickly, eager to have answers now that the stranger was sitting right in front of him.

Ari, busy with the machine, finally looked over the counter.

The man opened his mouth and began to speak.

“Saif, I’m Saif-” the man started.

“Oh, no, no, no. Not you again.” Ari said and began to make his way over from behind the counter. “You can’t afford my coffee, you get out!”

Adam stood up to stop Ari. “Come on, Ari. Just go back to your machine. Leave us be.”

“If this man thinks he can come in and order another coffee, he’s got another thing coming!” Ari said, “I don’t serve deadbeats!”

“Ari, please. I’ll be buying the coffee.”

“Yeah, once again, you foot the bill for this freeloader,” Ari said, nodding dismissively toward Saif. Ari cursed under his breath and shuffled back to his espresso machine.

Adam stood back and looked at the dusty man, whose face was suddenly more than familiar.

“Who are you?” Adam asked, desperate to figure out why he felt so strangely about this man.

Finally, Saif felt the need to speak. In front of this stranger, he felt an immediate release. He felt as if he stood in front of a mirror; as if, front of this man, Saif could finally tell the truth.

He wanted to tell him everything. About his papers, Nablus, Mustafa, his father- he wanted to share his entire life with this stranger. He noticed something behind the man's eyes that said he agreed, something unspoken bloomed between them.

Adam saw the unspoken thing between them, too. Suddenly, the sinking feeling in his stomach made sense, as if a piece of him had been restored after centuries of loss. He ordered more coffee from Ari and sat down with the man, finally, to talk.

## Part V

After a few hours at the café, the afternoon sun began to wane. Saif thought about the men back at the construction site and wondered if Mustafa was alive. Was he making a mistake? His heart panged every time he remembered the sound of Mustafa's head hitting the toolbox, the loud crack of bone against metal. Fear filled in the hollow space left by the painful pang of emotion, pouring in thick as concrete. Saif knew he could never go back to the site, he worried about the men, too. He knew that calling the police would only implicate the entire site for hiring men without proper papers, but he worried they might take matters into their own hands if Mustafa did not survive. He didn't want to believe that the men would hurt him, but he couldn't be sure of anything now. He knew he needed to leave Petak Tikva by nightfall. He wondered if Adam would take him to the border, but now, Mustafa's words crept back into his skull. Could he trust an Israeli? Could he trust a Jew?

Adam watched Saif sip his coffee. They spoke in broken Arabic and Hebrew. He learned that the man worked at a construction site across town, which excited him. He didn't think about what that meant, about the logistics of being a day laborer, but he wasn't bothered by that. He liked the idea of knowing someone whose world was so far removed from the abstract, someone who didn't have to think all the time. He felt that it must be relieving – to work all day and not have a care in the world. Saif seemed nervous, he kept looking out of the window as the day darkened.

“What is it?” Adam asked.

“Nothing, nothing,” Saif said, shaking his head.

“No, tell me,” he looked over at Ari, “he won't mind.”

“Do you have a car?” Saif said quickly.

“Erm, uh, yeah. Why?”

“I need a ride.”

Adam sat back. For the first time since they sat down, he questioned Saif’s intentions. His ears felt hot and he suddenly felt very stupid. How could he have not seen through this? He didn’t respond.

“Adam, please. I’ll explain in the car.”

“Explain now.” Adam tried to make his voice deeper.

Saif looked over at Ari behind counter. He breathed in sharply and leaned forward in his seat. “I *need* you to trust me.”

Saif’s eyes wiggled in their sockets, not breaking contact with Adam’s.

Adam studied Saif closely for the first time. He had washed off the concrete dust, revealing deep, dark circles under his eyes. His chin was round and stuck out from his jaw, the only soft element on his sharp face. Purpling bruises dotted his arms, his hands fidgeted nervously with the lid of his coffee cup.

Adam hesitated, thinking of what his father might say if Ari told him about his meeting with this dusty Palestinian. There were eyes everywhere in this small neighborhood, Adam knew, chances were that someone had already called his father already. He decided that it was best to get out of the café, too.

“Okay,” he said to Saif, “follow me.”

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Outside, the heat of the summer air pushed up against them. Bathed in the warm, honeyed light of the setting sun, the tinted windows of the neighborhood buildings seemed to quiver.



“My car is in the garage of my building. We have to go there,” Adam said as they walked.

“Your building? Where is that?” Saif looked around him.

“Five minutes’ walk down there,” Adam pointed down the street.

A flash of panic bolted down to Saif’s stomach. The construction site was only two parallel streets away from the building Adam pointed to. On a normal day, the men would be finishing up their day’s work by now and getting their dinner ready. But, today was not normal and Saif did not want to know what the men were doing instead of preparing food.

“No, no. I can’t go that way.” Saif stopped on the sidewalk, his sneakers scuffing on the concrete.

“What?” Adam stopped, too.

“I can’t go that way.”

Adam started to get annoyed. He clicked his tongue under his teeth.

“No, man, this is the only way.” He paused, studying Saif’s tense face. Not getting a response, Adam gave in. He sighed. “Fine. Look, you wait here. I’ll come back with the car.”

Saif nodded and leaned against a wall that lined the sidewalk. As Adam walked away, Said began to think of the men at the construction site. He imagined the worst: Mustafa dead, the men angry and looking for revenge. Panic and sadness wormed in to his chest, carving tunnels in his heart. He remembered his father again. He thought about what his father would do if he could see him now, possible murderer, definite coward. The sick feeling returned to his stomach, as if pulling him down to the center of the earth.

Anytime he thought of his father, he felt sick. He wished his father was still alive so he could tell him how he felt, how much anger and shame was inside of him. He spent says as a

teenager imagining that he fought back. He hated that he never got the chance to stick up for himself, hated that his father always called the shots. He wanted to be powerful, he wanted to get rid of the guilt that followed him around like a cloud. His legs felt weak, so he dropped to the floor. He waited.

Adam returned half an hour later in a new, grey Mercedes. Saif got in.

They drove for a time, nearing the edge of the city. Still irritated, Adam finally spoke. "Where do I take you?" Adam asked flatly.

Saif thought for a moment before answering. He weighed the risk of asking Adam to take him to the border against the risk of telling Adam about Mustafa. He didn't want Adam to think he was dangerous, but he couldn't stay in Petak Tikva.

"I need to get to the West Bank border." Saif stared at Adam without wavering.

Adam stared back at Saif. The farthest he had ever travelled in his car was Tel Aviv. The thought of driving to the border worried him, even if he had Israeli plates.

"Listen, man," Adam started, "I don't know. It's a pretty far-"

Saif cut him off. "I don't care. I *need* to get there." His voice was lower, firmer than before.

Adam was annoyed again. "I'm confused. You tell me you have no papers, then you say we need to leave. We're in *my* car. We go where *I* am willing to take you." He paused, then continued, "Unless I change my mind."

Saif watched Adam's profile as he drove. He noticed a change in his voice, a sarcasm that made him feel stupid and small. Saif hated feeling like he was nothing.

"Are you threatening me?" Saif puffed out his chest. "You don't know who I am, what I've done. I'd be careful if I were you."

Adam slowed the car and parked on a side street. He turned to look at Saif.

“One phone call, Saif, and I can send your ass straight to jail.” Once the words came out of his mouth, Adam regretted them. He started again, “Look, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

Saif felt the anger well up in his arms and travel down to his fists. He remembered his father, Abraham, the man at the bar, Mustafa – all the men in his life who belittled him. Now, this handsome man, someone who he thought he could trust, was making him feel stupid.

Adam spoke again. “Look, man. I’m sorry. That was out of line.”

Saif just nodded and waved his hand in the air.

“Let’s just go,” he said.

They drove for twenty minutes in silence. Saif couldn’t stop thinking about what Adam had said. Adam couldn’t ignore the anger he had heard in Saif’s voice. Both men felt uncertain and uneasy. Neither could figure how to get out of the situation they were both in.

Adam noticed flashing lights on the side of the road a few hundred feet in front of them. Saif noticed, too. He began to worry.

“Shit. Go around,” he told Adam.

Still feeling bad about what he had said earlier, Adam didn’t argue. He turned down a dark side road that led to a residential area.

“Good. Stop here.” Saif said.

“Look, man. I’m not your personal driver.” Adam was annoyed again. “We need to stop,” he said.

“What? Why?” Saif protested.

“I need a drink. We’ll wait out the checkpoint and I’ll take you after.”

They drove to a small liquor store on the corner. Adam went inside and came out with a bottle of Arak.

“All they had,” he said apologetically.

Saif sat in the passenger’s seat with his arms crossed, visibly annoyed, too.

“Where to now?” he asked.

Adam craned his neck from his driver’s seat vantage point.

“I think I see I park over there.” Seeing Saif’s confused reaction he quickly added, “It’s fine, Saif. No one will see us.”

Saif sat still, his arms crossed in front of him, trying to quell the annoyance that welled up in his fists again.

“Come on, man. I’ll take you all the way to the border. I promise.” Adam said.

Slowly, Saif opened his door and got out of the car. In silence, he walked next to Adam to the park.

## Part VI

The lights in the park were turned off. Saif and Adam sat on the grass and passed the bottle of Arak to one another in awkward silence. Saif swallowed huge gulps of the liquid. It tasted like licorice and burned his throat. It reminded him of his American cousin, Layla. She and he shared shots of Arak one summer when she visited with her family. He was eighteen and she was fifteen. They both were angry with their fathers for different reasons. They shared cigarettes and sips of Arak and talked. That was the night he told her he liked men. She was the only person in his family who knew.

Adam spoke, pulling Saif away from his memories.

“I used to love coming to the park with my grandfather,” Adam lit a cigarette.

“Oh, yeah?” Saif said, unsure of how to respond.

“Yeah. We’d be at the park for hours. He’d watch me ride my bike or push me on a swing. He couldn’t really walk that well, but he always took me to the park when I asked.”

“Why couldn’t he walk?” Saif remembered his own father, whose diabetes made it painful for him to walk before he died.

“He had an injury. From the camps. Y’know, during the Holocaust.”

Saif nodded, but didn’t say anything. Adam continued.

“His foot got infected one winter and they didn’t give him any treatment. He survived long enough to see the camps liberated, but just barely. His limp was a reminder of that for him. At least that’s what he always told me.”

Saif nodded again and took a swig of the arak.

Adam felt self-conscious. He hadn’t spoken about his grandfather in a long time. He felt an emptiness in his stomach just thinking about him. He grabbed the bottle from Saif and took a

huge gulp.

“What about you?” Adam asked and passed him the bottle.

“What do you mean?” Saif took the bottle. It slipped in his hand slightly. He realized he hadn’t eaten anything since morning. His body felt old and tired.

“What’s your life like? Your parents? Siblings?” Adam brushed back his curly hair and leaned forward.

Saif felt strange. The arak made him dizzy and he began to feel small again. He didn’t answer.

Adam leaned in closer. “Saif? You okay?” The arak began to affect him, too. It washed away his irritation. He felt open and alive.

Saif noticed that Adam’s thigh was close to his. He could smell the arak on his breath, could almost feel the heat coming off of his body.

Saif lifted his hand from his side and placed it on Adam’s thigh. Adam didn’t say anything. They two men looked at each other in the dark. Saif moved his hand up. Adam’s jeans were thick, but Saif could feel a hard lump in his crotch. He felt it over the fabric and leaned forward into Adam.

Adam swung his arm out and bashed Saif on the side of the head.

“Fuck! Faggot!” He shouted and punched Saif harder.

A ringing erupted in Saif’s ears. It took Saif a couple seconds to regain his stability, the arak and the blow to his head blurred his vision.

The anger that receded inside him came out full force. He felt stupid, small. He was an idiot for trusting Adam, for not listening to Mustafa’s words spoken so long before.

Saif stood up and began throwing punches of his own. He punched hard, feeling thr

crunch of bone under his knuckle. He punched at his father, at Mustafa, at the man in the bar, at Abraham, at Ari. He punched until he couldn't breathe any more. Adam groaned and cried, but Saif didn't stop. Saif punched until Adam stopped crying.

Saif lifted his hand. It was covered in sticky, wet blood. He breathed in deeply. He looked up, noticing for the first time that the moon was absent from the sky. The only light that illuminated them came from a solitary street lamp at the entrance to the park. Saif stood up.

He walked away from Adam's body, almost floating, just as he did when he was pulled away from Mustafa.

This time, he was sure of what kind of damage he had done.

**June 10, 2014**

*In the living room yesterday morning, after breakfast, Teta Basima told me this is the hottest summer Burqa has had in over forty years. She said the last time she remembers it being this hot, it was 1970 and her first daughter was getting married. She smiled a lot, remembering the wedding. Nasser fell in love with Widad after he saw her walking in an olive grove one morning in spring, she told me. "Widad's skin was soft and white like the petals of an almond blossom," she said, "She was the prettiest girl in Burqa."*

*I went to Dalia's house that afternoon. Aunt Widad cooked lunch, zuchinni stuffed with rice and meat. We helped her cut the cucumber and tomato for the salad. Her kitchen is small and the appliances are old, unchanged since Widad's wedding in 1970. The refrigerator hummed and shuddered. It sounded like I imagine an iron lung would sound. We ate quietly and quickly, the fridge shuddering in the background. Shuck-hiss, shuck-hiss, shuck-hiss. Later, on the balcony, smoking cigarettes in secret, Dalia told me Aunt Widad was still having her nightmares. "She's waking up at night, calling out for my dad and Hamzeh. Last night, I found her in front of the fridge, staring at the magnets, whispering surahs from the Quran."*

*We slept on mattresses in the living room that night. It was hot and the fan in the room did nothing but push the hot, thick air around like a blow dryer. I couldn't breathe or sleep. Dalia didn't seem to mind, she slept deeply on the mattress next to mine. Her mouth open, a soft sound clucked in her throat every time she breathed in. I turned to my side and looked at the family photos on the wall. In the center, surrounded by smiles, was a portrait of Hamzeh. His brown eyes stared back at me, thirteen years old and so defiant. He looked like all of us and none of us*



*at once.*

*I felt it again. The slippery, sad feeling of loss. I wondered if Dalia ever feels it. I'm sure Aunt Widad does. From the kitchen, the fridge's shuck-hiss-shuck-hiss echoed in the small apartment. A door opened down the hall. I heard Aunt Widad's slippers padding on the tile towards the kitchen. The light flicked on, making the hallway glow. One of the plastic dining chairs scraped across the tile. Pages shuffled, settled after a few seconds. She must have found her place. Then I heard her whispers, along with the hum of the fridge and Dalia's clucking throat. Her prayers echoed through the house and I stared at Hamzeh's photograph, waiting for sleep to come to me.*

## **The Chameleon**

Blue light has a way of making everything feel old, dusty. Haroun's grandmother's house in Burqa drowned in blue light in the summers. The upstairs rooms were only blue in the mornings, by afternoon the sun invaded and made everything warm. The kitchen stayed blue until the early afternoon, but Teta Basima always kept the windows open and the sun found its way in. Haroun liked the basement best because it was always blue, cool and quiet. Haroun spent his summers in the basement, climbing on the stacked sacks of grain to search for mice. He loved animals. He felt he understood them and that they understood him. He and his brother, Daud, spent summers on Teta Basima's farm in Burqa, collecting animals and bugs displaying them in the garden for the neighborhood kids to look at. Daud called it a "zoo," and they played at being zookeepers the way some children play house. Haroun named all the animals in the zoo: Hamid, a red pigeon with a deformed wing; Sara, a white mouse with red eyes; Amjad, Tarek, and Zeki, the tarantulas; and Fareed, the rooster who crowed every morning and woke everyone up.

At night, Haroun brought the animals inside and kept them in the basement. He marked their names on shoe boxes for them to sleep in and lined them up side by side in a corner. Then, he set up a little bed for himself on some grain sacks and slept, watching over the animals all night. Teta Basima didn't mind that he slept in the basement and neither did anyone else in the house during the summers – it meant more room in the upstairs rooms for people to sleep. Sometimes, Daud joined Haroun and they stayed up all night drawing out plans for the real zoo they'd build when they were both old enough. On nights when Daud stayed upstairs with the older cousins, Haroun stayed in the basement, imagining what it'd be like to be older.

One summer, Teta Basima's house was so full of people it felt like it would burst. Cousins came from all over. Even his American cousin, Layla, came to stay. Haroun felt awkward around her and he could tell she felt strange, too. They both fumbled with their English and Arabic. Their vocabularies were like mismatched puzzle pieces smashed together, forced and confused.

Teta Basima's house was so packed that summer, she made all the cousins sleep in the basement. Haroun protested, fearing for his animals, but Teta insisted. Haroun stacked some flour sacks around his animals' sleeping boxes, to protect them from prying eyes. Every night, while the cousins stayed awake talking, Haroun sat in the corner of the basement and watched his animals. He barely slept and the cousins teased him, calling him "*boomeh*," Arabic for "owl." He didn't mind, as long his animals were safe.

In the mornings, Haroun went looking for animals to show in his zoo. This morning, the sun was bright and the air was so still it seemed to suck every little sound that floated out from the neighbor's houses into the sky. Haroun walked out onto the path that connected Teta Basima's farm with the rest of the village. His sandals crunched on the gravel. The sound made a lizard abandon her hiding place underneath a rock. She scuttled across the floor like a four legged bullet into a pile of boulders underneath a few olive trees. Haroun chased her, eager to have a lizard in his animal collection.

She dove under the pile of rocks and Haroun followed. He threw rocks left and right, disrupting the homes of other bugs. A grub shuddered, surprised by the sudden assault of sunlight on her fat, white body. Haroun lifted the final rock to find only woodlice and more

grubs. Disheartened, he dropped the rock beside him. It thudded on the ground, sinking in to the soft dirt like a heavy seed.

A breeze picked up, ruffling the silver leaves of the olive trees overhead. Haroun looked up, squinting. A creature moved on the branch over him, almost imperceptible at first. Haroun got closer for a better look, he reached out and tugged at the branch. The creature braced itself from the sudden movement, holding on to the swaying branch with green, knotty claws. Haroun had seen this animal in picture books before: a chameleon.

He slid his fingers along the rough back of the animal, half hoping the animal's skin would change color to match his and leave a peachy line down her spine. But, nothing changed and the chameleon stayed a dusty green, matching the olive tree leaves. Haroun slid his hand underneath the chameleon's belly to pick it up. Her throat bubbled and she let out a soft cry, voicing her discomfort at Haroun's touch.

Haroun carefully plucked her from her branch and placed her on his arm. She clung on tightly, her throat still bubbling in her dismay. He studied her rough skin and huge eyes. He wished he could speak to her, to make her feel better.

"We'll be home, soon," he said, "you'll have a place to live with all sorts of new friends."

She stared back at him, making bubbles in her throat.

"You'll love it," Haroun said, and started back for the farm.

He named his chameleon Salwa, which made everyone laugh. His cousins couldn't understand why Haroun always gave his animals human names. But, Haroun didn't care. He made Salwa a special box to sleep in, one with a mesh lid instead of holes so she could breathe easily at night. In the garden, where he and Daud made the zoo, they put Salwa in a huge bird

cage filled with olive branches. Kids came from the neighborhood every day to see Salwa. Haroun even started charging them half a shekel per day to hold her or to place different colored objects in her cage and watch her change colors. Then, Rushdi came to Haroun's zoo and changed everything.

The neighborhood bully, Rushdi made it his mission to antagonize and embarrass all the other neighborhood kids. He lived with his grandmother in a small shack at the end of the village, next to an empty lot where the villagers burned yard clippings and trash. Haroun hated him and all the other kids were afraid of him.

It was nearing the end of the summer and almost time for Haroun to return all the animals back to their homes. Rushdi had been away visiting his aunt in Gaza, but he was back in Burqa and he came to see the zoo. He and his two friends showed up at Teta Basima's and banged on the metal door to garden.

"Let us in!" Rushdi yelled, "We know you've got a chameleon in there!"

Haroun froze behind the door, his heart began to beat hard and fast inside his chest. He turned to Daud, who only shrugged.

"What do we do?" Haroun asked, "We can't let him in here."

"He'll get angry and start yelling louder, Haroun. You know Teta Basima will be upset."

"But, I don't want him to see Salwa. Please, Daud. Do something!" Haroun was panicking. He heard stories about Rushdi and how he was with animals. Once, Haroun heard, Rushdi tied a cat's front and back legs together, strung it up on a tree branch and sliced at the soft flesh under its arms. When some older boys discovered him under the tree with the cat, they punched him in the stomach and tried to take his pocket knife away. Rushdi dodged them, climbing up the tree to get away. The older boys said that, when they tried to get him down, he

pretended to be a cat and hissed at them from the branches. They gave up, picked up the injured cat and walked back home. Rushdi laughed loudly from the tree, mocking them as they walked away.

“Open up, wimps! We wanna see the chameleon change colors!” Rushdi yelled from behind the door. His two friends began to bang on the door with him.

“Haroun!” It was Teta Basima’s voice this time. “Your dad is napping! Open that damn door before he wakes up!”

Haroun looked at Daud and then at Salwa. He grabbed the birdcage.

“Take her into the basement. Go through the window over there.” Haroun shoved Salwa and her cage into his brother’s arms.

Daud stood for a while, unsure of what to do. He was the older brother, after all. Should he be the one doing the protecting?

“We’re going to break this door down!” Rushdi yelled, pounding his fists on the metal.

“Go, Daud, go!” Haroun shoved his brother forward.

He opened the garden gate. Rushdi and his friends shoved their way in, pushing past Haroun towards the zoo.

“What’s this?” Rushdi said, shoving a shoe box in front of Haroun’s face.

“That’s Zeki. A tarantula.” Haroun said, trying to make his face as stiff as possible.

“I know what it is, dummy. Where is the *chameleon*?” Rushdi moved in, he pushed his face into Haroun’s face. His breath was hot and smelled like fish.

“I put her back in the olive tree yesterday. You missed her.” Haroun said, moving his head back.

One of Rushdi's friends snorted. "Yeah, right. She's here somewhere." He looked around Haroun as if expecting to see Salwa hanging off his back.

Rushdi slanted his eyes.

"Where is it?" He whispered, threatening.

Haroun began to sweat. "*She* isn't here. I swear."

"Swear to God," Rushdi threatened.

Haroun kept quiet.

"Do it. Swear to God."

"I...swear. I swear to- to-" Haroun couldn't finish his sentence.

"He's lying!" Rushdi's other friend yelled, slapping Rushdi on the back excitedly.

"I know, dummy." Rushdi shook his head. He moved in closer to Haroun, who had inched his way toward a bougainvillea tree. "Where is it?" He repeated.

At that moment, Daud crawled out from the basement window. Haroun looked over at his brother, panicked.

Rushdi may have been a bully, but he wasn't an idiot.

"There." Rushdi pointed at the window and his friends rushed over to open it.

"I put her in the olive grove, I swear!" Haroun yelled, chasing the older boys.

Daud tried to stop them from going in the window, but Rushdi's friends overtook him. They shoved him aside and crawled down to the basement. Haroun ran after them.

Everything was blue in the basement, cool and dusty. It smelled like the kerosene Teta Basima used to clean the floors. Mice scuttled behind the sacks of grain, fearful of the stomping feet of Rushdi and his friends. It didn't take long for Rushdi to find the birdcage. Inside, Salwa

hung on an olive branch, her skin green and streaked with silvery lines. Rushdi picked up the cage and swung it around.

“Ah! My friends,” Rushdi put on an accent, “I give you: The Chameleon!”

Rushdi’s friends laughed heavily, holding Haroun and Daud back.

“Give her back. Rushdi!” Haroun shouted, pushing back on Rushdi’s tall friend. “Don’t hurt her!”

“Let’s see how this thing works!” Rushdi shouted over Haroun’s voice. He opened the door of the birdcage and reached in for Salwa.

Her throat bubbled and she started screeching. Her cry echoed through the basement. It sounded like a metal chair a scraping tile floor, high-pitched and loud.

“Stop, Rushdi! You’re hurting her!” Daud yelled, struggling with Rushdi’s other friend.

Rushdi laughed. “Come on, boys. We need to see what this thing can do.”

He grabbed an empty flour sack and shoved Salwa, still screeching, inside.

The commotion drew in other cousins from upstairs. Layla, Saif and Dalia opened the door of the basement.

“Teta says to play quieter!” Dalai called down from the top of the stairs.

Layla peered in at the boys, then looked at the birdcage upended on the floor.

“Where’s Salwa?” She asked.

Haroun shouted, “He’s got her! He’s got her!”

Immediately, Saif and Layla rushed down the stairs. They charged at Rushdi, pushing past the two other boys.

“Stop!” Rushdi yelled. He threw the flour sack with Salwa in it on the floor in front of him and lifted his leg, balancing over the sack. “One step closer and the thing gets it.”



“Listen, man. We’re not angry. Just stop.” Saif tried to reason with Rushdi. Haroun knew it was hopeless.

“I said stop!” Rushdi threatened. His leg hovered over the sack. Salwa wiggled inside, trying to find her way out.

Haroun knew the only way to get Salwa to safety would be to run and grab her before he stomped, but he didn’t know how. He looked around the room for ways to distract the boys. He thought of the tarantulas. Release them? Scare everyone into scattering? Call for his father? Could they even hear them down here?

While Haroun thought, Rushdi’s leg still hovered over the sack. He swayed, almost losing his balance. Then Daud charged.

Rushdi’s tall friend held Daud back. Daud yelled. Saif pulled the other boy’s hair. The boy yelled. Layla started to cry and Dalia ran back up the stairs for her parents.

Haroun watched Rushdi. His face turned red and he began to sweat, lightly, at the temples. Haroun could tell he was frustrated. He had lost control of the room.

“He’s going to do it!” Haroun yelled, “everybody, stop!”

No one heard him over the yelling and screaming.

As if in slow motion, Rushdi lifted his leg higher and brought it crashing down like a judge’s gavel on to the sack.

Salwa screeched. It was so loud, it filled the room with cacophonous sound. The sack shuddered, moving like an animatronic toy losing battery life. Rushdi stomped again. A red pool formed on the sack, staining the white. Rushdi kept stomping. Over and over again.

When it was over, Rushdi picked up the dripping flour sack and scoffed.

“Guess they really do change colors,” he said. He tossed the sack at Haroun. “Come on, let’s go.” They left through the window.

Haroun picked up the lifeless pile. Blood dripped out on the tile floor and on his hands. He looked up at his cousins, shaking. Their faces were a spectrum in varying degrees of despair and disgust. Haroun let out little sighs of sadness, like Teta Basima did when she was really upset. They heaved out of his mouth, fast and quick, like little gusts of wind. Blue light washed over Haroun and his cousins, sealing their sorrow in dust for all the years to come.

**June 20, 2014**

*I hate the taste of licorice. It makes the back of my throat sore, the flavor punching my vocal chords. Whenever we're in the living room, Teta Basima always tries to feed me licorice candy she keeps in a bowl on the coffee table in the living room. She shoves the bowl in my face and insists I take a piece, telling me she remembers how much I love licorice. I don't have the heart to tell her I hate it, so I eat them. They're always hard, so I sit there chewing while she stares at me. The licorice a hard, hockey puck in my mouth, I try to say thank you, but it never comes out right. She just smiles and hands me the bowl again. I take another piece.*

*Once, Saif and I drank arak. I hated it, too. It tasted like liquid licorice. But, we kept drinking and, when we were drunk, we walked around Burqa falling all over each other, scandalizing the neighbors.*

*I think about Saif a lot. I wish I knew where he was.*

*The night we drank arak, we walked around the neighborhood. With Saif, no one questioned why I, a girl, was out so late. We walked to the graveyard behind the mosque in the village. The mosque's minaret light was on, it shined green all over the gravestones. We walked through them, stumbling on the uneven ground. We tried to find Daud, but the cement stones were hard to read in the dark. We gave up and sank down. Saif was a great storyteller, like my dad. That night, told me a story about a strange man, a bum, who drank tea with them one summer in Nablus when he was a kid. He said he always felt uncomfortable about that night and that man, as if he were jinn who had come to steal his soul. "Layla, his eyes were black," he told me, "like*

*Zainab's." I just laughed at him.*

*We sat in the graveyard for hours, tracing lines in the dirt with our fingers, unsure of where we were going.*

## The Stranger

In Nablus, when the sun set in the summer, the whole world changed. Lucky families who owned apartments on the ground floors of their buildings pulled out lawn chairs to sit in their courtyards, laughing with each other behind trellises smothered by grape vines. Luckier families who owned apartments on the top floors of their buildings brought lawn chairs up to their rooves and sat in circles smoking *argileh* and gazing at the skyline dotted by olive trees and sleeping herds of sheep. Families who lived in between the two places were the luckiest, choosing to flit back and forth from top to bottom floors, sharing cups of tea and stories, their children running along the stairwells, breathless.

We lived on the fifth floor of an apartment building on Deir Ghassaneh Street. We were one of the luckiest families, spending our summer nights split between Abu Jalal's roof top and Abu Ayman's courtyard. Our neighborhood shared an empty lot that sat in the middle of the block. The lot was full of flaky rocks and exploding cucumbers that burst when we brushed by too closely, stabbing our bare shins with their spiky outer skins. At night, the neighborhood's teenage boys built fires in the center of the lot, carefully plucking stalks of the plant with the spiky fruit still intact and throwing them into the fire to watch them explode in the flames.

One night, while the adults sat at Abu Ayman's drinking coffee and smoking apple tobacco, a strange man stumbled in through the arched gate and into the courtyard. He smelled dusty, like forgotten bags of grain in the basements of village houses patiently waiting to be milled for flour. He shuffled past Abu Yahya and Umm Jamal, aiming straight for an empty plastic lawn chair next to my father. I had wandered into the adult's circle to get a bowl of watermelon and salty, *Nabulsi* cheese, but none of the adults were watching me; their eyes followed the stooped back of the stranger.

The man sat down in the empty seat next to my father and stretch out his legs, rubbing his thighs as he sat. Without a word, he stretched out his arms, lacing his fingers together and pressed outward, cracking his knuckles. Then, he swung his head in a slow circle, stretching out his neck muscles. He reached over and took the *argileh* hose from my father's hands and took a huge puff. We all froze, watching him. He blew out a waterfall of smoke.

"So, what's the news?" He said, looking around at the circle of adults and stopping at me, the only ten year old in the area.

The adults looked around, confused and wanting explanations.

"Who are you?" Said my dad, tilting his head to the side like he always did when he was a mixture of confused and slightly peeved.

"It's a lovely night out," said the man, ignoring my father's question and taking another huge puff of tobacco. The water in the *argileh* gurgled as he sucked in the smoke, the tobacco in the bowl sizzled. "I'll have a plate of watermelon and *Nabulsi*, if you don't mind, dear." He nodded to the sixteen year old daughter of Abu Ayman, who sat by the platter of watermelon wedges and cheese. She blushed and looked at her mother, who only blushed, too, nodding as if to say, "Go ahead. Give him a plate." The girl shyly passed a plate to the stranger, who accepted it with both hands. He used his fingers to eat, slurping at the watermelon juice that dribbled down his stubbly chin. He finished his plate in what seemed like seconds, using the back of his right arm to wipe his mouth.

"Great, great. Now, where were we? Where should we begin?" He looked around at the still silent group of adults. While he ate, they had all whispered to one another, asking if the old stranger was a relative of anyone in the building or if he could possibly be the long lost father of Ismael, the kind, but slow caretaker of the building who lived in the basement apartment.

No one answered him.

“Ah, well. Yes, let’s see here, I believe I left off with the story about Mazen and the gypsies...” He turned to Umm Ayman, a short, fat woman with a face like tapioca pudding, “Have you heard it? It’s quite good.” Umm Ayman only blushed and turned to her husband, unsure of what to do. The stranger sat still for a moment, then took a deep breath and began.

“Back in those days, in the days before Nablus had electricity, people spent their nights just like we are doing right now, sitting in their courtyards or on their rooves. Except, back then, we didn’t have such large apartment buildings and we definitely didn’t have any of those.” He nodded his head to a young woman who had her flip phone out and was sending an SMS message to her friend. The young woman blushed, flipped her phone shut and stuffed it in her pocket.

“Yes, well,” he said, smacking his lips, “back in those days, large groups of gypsies lived in tents on the outskirts of town. The women spent their days in the Old City, begging for spare change or a bite to eat. My mother, God bless her, always told me to stay away, for fear of the Evil Eye. She was a deeply superstitious woman, God rest her soul, and the gypsies scared the lights out of her. She always told me to be wary, that gypsies often show up when they weren’t invited, to steal food and drink and babies.”

“Babies?” A meek voice lilted out from the circle. Abu Ayman’s sixteen year old daughter peered straight into the stranger’s eyes.

“Yes, my dear, that’s right. Babies.” The stranger’s mouth lifted up in a small smile, exposing his shiny, black teeth. Abu Ayman’s daughter shuddered.

“Anyway, the gypsies had a reputation for salacious behavior. The women, after they spent the entire day begging, would often be found down in the olive grove, drinking whisky

with the gypsy men and dancing around fires. I mean, I know this because my mother told me, and, God bless her, never lied. I swear, it's all true. One time, they found- I swear, this is true- a human skull inside a gypsy tent that had been abandoned. I swear, *wallah*, and you know, I'd never use the Lord's in vain." He winked at me from his seat, taking a huge puff of the *argileh* and blowing the smoke all over my father, who still sat next to him.

"Anyway, where was I? Oh, yes, babies. Babies were high on the list of priorities for the gypsies because they made a great return when they were sold to childless Jewish couples in Jerusalem. Palestinian babies are the strongest babies, aren't they?" He winked again, this time at Abu Ayman's daughter, who shuffled in her seat, pulling at her skirt nervously.

"Anyway, Mazen was only two- or was he one and half?- No, no. He was one and three quarters of a year old when a gypsy woman tried to steal him out of his mother's arms. It was a cold, blustery day in March and Umm Mazen needed to go to Tarek the Grocer's for cucumbers and tomatoes to put in her *fatoush* salad. Did I mention it was Ramadan? No? Well, it was. *Wallah*. As you know, the neighborhoods are always empty during the days in Ramadan. Women spend their days cooking and the men, when they aren't at work, sleep in the den until it's time to eat. What do children do during Ramadan? That's what I've always wondered...I myself have never fasted, my parents were never religious..."

With this tangent, the stranger's thoughts tapered off and he became consumed by something that he didn't share with the circle. They all sat in silence, waiting for the story to continue. The stranger took another puff of the *argileh* and coughed, which seemed to push him out of deep thought.

"Oh, you're still here? Oh, oh. Yes, yes, where was I again? Yes, Umm Mazen. Well...she want to Tarek's grocery store on the corner of her block, pulling her *abaya* close to



block the wind. She dragged Mazen by the hand along the way, pulling him away from his desire to inspect every passing stone and insect. She was on a schedule, dinner had to be ready by *Maghreb* call to prayer. She and Mazen passed an old woman sitting on the ground, her palm outstretched, begging for change. Distracted, Umm Mazen stuffed a couple coins into the wrinkled hand, waving away the thanks that issued from the old woman's mouth.

In Tarek's small store, Umm Mazen searched for the least wrinkled of Tarek's old tomatoes. *I'm so sorry, Umm Mazen*, said Tarek, *the shipment from Gaza was delayed this month. Checkpoints, again.* Umm Mazen just lifted her eyebrows to acknowledge Tarek, stuffing a few, less wrinkled tomatoes into a paper sack to take home. Grabbing Mazen's hand, she paid Tarek and rushed out of the store to hurry back home. The wind swirled around them, blowing almond blossoms in to Mazen's face. He laughed, trying to catch the soft, pink flowers. He let go of his mother's hand, using both of his tiny hands to trap the flowers. Distracted, thinking of all the dishes she needed to cook when they got home, she did, after all, have to cook for her mother-in-law, - very critical woman, I heard – Umm Mazen forgot that her son was with her. She picked up the pace of her steps, forgetting that a toddler's little legs cannot compete with an adult stride.

Mazen, distracted by the flight of the flowers, began to walk in the opposite direction of his mother. Eventually, they were a block away from each other, which might as well be a million miles, when you consider Mazen was not even yet two years old. Then, from behind a cracking wall, the old beggar woman appeared.

"Little boy, where is your mother? Did she forget you?" The woman licked her lips, smiling. Her teeth glistened black and shiny.

"Mama." Said Mazen, unable to say any more than a handful of words.

“I’ll take you to her, my heart.” The old woman reached out a wrinkled arm to Mazen, beckoning.

“Mama,” Mazen said again, looking around him for any familiar face.

“Yes, honey. Mama...Mama.” The old gypsy woman swooped her *abaya* around the boy, enveloping him in cloth, black as night and scratchy as gravel. Mazen smelled something familiar, something like dust. It reminded him of his grandmother’s farm house, the basement where she kept her grain. He remembered the smell from when he’d grab handfuls of it to throw at the chickens in her front yard. He moved in close to her, and smelled the dirt in her hair. She kept saying *Mama, Mama*, and Mazen really believed she would take him back to her.”

The man stopped talking again, this time to take a huge gulp of tea from an abandoned cup on the plastic side table next to him. He coughed, holding a balled up fist to his chest, pounding. When he stopped cough, she clapped his hands on his legs and said, “Well, it’s late, huh? I better be on my way.” He stood up shakily.

“But, what happened to Mazen?” I asked him. “Did he ever get back home?”

The stranger looked at me through the night, squinting his eyes. “Eh? Who?” He said, scratching his stubbly chin.

“Mazen? The little boy?”

“How do you know Mazen?” He said, shuffling over to me.

“You just...the story...you said, you said that-”

“You probably shouldn’t talk about things like that, young man. Just get yourself into trouble.” He smiled, clicking his teeth, black as soot and shiny.

“My mother always told me, God rest her soul, she always told me to watch where my

mouth goes because my feet might not want to follow. Be careful, kid.” He tousled my hair.

I watched him shuffle off into the night, a trail of dust following him.

## One Day

Yahya watched the sun sink into the curve of mountain that overlooked the city. In the summer months, sunset made Nablus look as though it were dipped in gold. A brief illusion, thought Yahya, as he picked up his empty cup of tea and made his way back into the shop.

Inside, Mahmoud argued with a customer. They gestured violently with their hands, faces inches apart, screaming at each other.

“I won’t pay for shitty service! Fix it now, or I’ll go somewhere else!”

“It’s not our service that’s shitty, it’s your shitty cellphone! Buy a new one and then we can talk!” Mahmoud struck his fingers in the customers face.

Yahya knew better than to try and intervene. Mahmoud was famous for his hot-temper, and Yahya couldn’t afford to lose this job. There were hundreds of cell-phone repair shops in Nablus, but Mahmoud’s was the only one that would hire an older man like Yahya.

The customer gathered the pieces of his cellphone from the countertop, made an obscene gesture at Mahmoud and left the shop.

“Serves him right that cheap son-of-a-bitch!” Mahmoud looked over at Yahya for approval, but Yahya just shrugged. Mahmoud waved his hand in dismissal and walked into the backroom leaving only the whirring sound of the box fan to fill the shop.

As night fell, a few more customers came in to the shop. They left cell-phones with cracked screens, chargers that had frayed at the ends, laptops with keys missing, broken wireless routers. Yahya put these items on the shelves in the backroom along with all the other orders the shop received. A graveyard for interrupted communications, he thought. As he was writing a receipt for a white Samsung Galaxy S4 with a cracked screen, his own cellphone rang.

“Alo?”

“Yahya? Yahya, are you there?” The voice sounded muffled through the speaker of his Nokia 3510.

“Yes, hello? Who is this?”

“Yahya, it’s me! Your brother, Ibraheem! Seriously, man, you need to upgrade your damn cellphone!”

Yahya laughed, “Saher! You sound like shit whether or not it’s through an old Nokia or a new smartphone. *Keefak?*”

“I’m good, everything’s good, brother. Listen. Your visa was approved! We got the email this morning. I’d have forwarded it to you, but you never check your emails anyway.”

“*Jad?* Thank God! That’s great news, I can’t wait to tell Noor and the kids.”

“Yeah, we’re excited, too. Layla is beside herself. She can’t wait to see Haroun and Daud again. It’s been too long, my brother.”

Yahya smiled into the speaker of the cellphone, glad to finally have something to look forward to. “Okay, brother. *Inshallah*, Noor, the boys and I will see very soon.”

That night, walking home from the shop, Yahya thought about the United States. Ever since his brother moved there in 1979 for school, Yahya had wanted to join him. But, their father was dying and there were many loose ends to tie up before he passed. Ibraheem petitioned for he petitioned for Yahya and his family to immigrate soon as he received citizenship. The whole process took years and years. I didn’t help that Yahya spent an entire year saving up money to pay for the immigration fees. There’ll be more fees to pay once we get a move on this approval, Yahya thought, I’d better ask Abu-Fares for a loan.

As he walked through the streets, Yahya felt as though he were seeing Nablus for the first time. Now he was finally getting out, he felt a bitter sort of sadness. He passed the café where he first tried *argileh*, the sweet, sticky smell of the apple tobacco filled his nostrils and made him regret having quit smoking five years earlier. He walked through a noisy neighborhood, where an engagement party was being held in the courtyard of an apartment building. Music and cigarette smoke filled the air and mixed in the scent of jasmine flowers that lined the walls of the apartment buildings. People clapped, women ululated, men shouted congratulations and kissed each other's cheeks. Everyone danced. Yahya watched for a moment, enthralled by the din that seemed to break the balminess of the night in half. He moved on.

He turned onto a dimly lit street. It was quiet and everyone he passed seemed to walk quickly, heads bent down and not talking. He felt the nervousness that seemed to pass through the people's footsteps. Looking around, he noticed a soldier standing at the foot of the street, smoking a cigarette under the streetlight. Yahya's shoulders tensed up. He instinctively felt in his pocket for his wallet which held his ID card. He took his hand out of his pocket quickly and held his arms at his sides. As he passed the young soldier he held his breath. One day, when I'm in the United States, I won't have to worry about soldiers and guns, Yahya thought. One day.

"Come on, Noor! If we don't leave now, we'll miss the bus to Amman!" Yahya called out for his wife from the taxi downstairs.

"Okay, okay. I'm coming! I just need to tell Fathiyeh how to water the plants properly!"

Yahya shook his head. His wife was so protective of her plants. He was surprised she agreed to leave without them, even if they were going to the States.

In order to leave for the States, Yahya and his family needed to travel to Amman, Jordan first. No airports operated in the Palestinian territories, and it was more trouble for them to get in to Tel Aviv than Amman. At the bus depot, they filed in to a huge travel bus with other travelers. The bus was packed, full of chatting people, crying babies and stressed out employees trying to check people's tickets and keep people in order. Yahya and his family sat down in their seats and waited for the bus to leave the depot. People filed in, took their seats, argued about who got the window or who got to sit in the front or the back. Finally, they were ready to move. Yahya closed his eyes to try and sleep.

When he awoke, they had arrived at the border. The travelers filed out of the bus and gathered their things. Israeli soldiers looked on from their passport control stations. Yahya's hands shook as he felt his shirt pocket for his papers; he steadied them as he picked up their luggage and walked to the passport control station. He, Noor, Daud and Haroun stood in line for the metal detector as a soldier searched through their bags. He watched on as the man fumbled through the suitcase, squeezing the bags of *za'atar* and *maramia*, roughly unfolding Yahya's shirts and pants. Yahya looked at his two sons, they didn't look him in the eye. Yahya walked through the metal detector. It beeped loudly.

"Again," a soldier nodded at him.

Yahya walked back through the metal detector.

It beeped again.

This time, a soldier walked up to him. "Anything metal in your pocket?" He asked, in broken Arabic.

"No, nothing." Yahya shook his head.

The soldier patted him down and nodded toward the metal detector. "Again."

Yahya walked through the metal detector again, keeping his hands at his sides.

It beeped again.

The soldier turned to another soldier and said something Yahya did not understand. Then he walked over to Yahya. Yahya looked down at the soldier's hands, they looked sweaty.

"Take off your clothes." The young soldier mumbled, not looking Yahya in the eye.

"Here? In front of all these people?" He looked back at his sons and his wife. They stared at the floor, embarrassed and afraid.

"Take off your clothes. Strip search. Now."

"But, everyone can see. Don't you have a room? I promise I have nothing in my-"

"Take off your clothes now!" The soldier looked at Yahya, holding on tight to the rifle hung around his neck.

Yahya turned to look around at the people waiting in line. No one made eye contact with him. Daud and Haroun turned bright red, staring at the floor as if wishing their gaze could bore a giant pit in the ground to swallow up the checkpoint. Noor, silent in line, began to cry softly.

Yahya felt a hole erupt in his heart.

As Yahya slowly unbuttoned his shirt, he felt the immigration papers in his shirt pocket.

One day, he thought. One day.



## **Suleiman the Saracen**

Arrows ricocheted off the stone walls of the Tower of David, falling to the ground at the soldiers' feet. A woman ran screaming, barefoot and dragging a small child, through the alleyways, searching for cover. A large boulder catapulted over the walls, crashing into the tower, sending a shower of rock through the air. Horses whinnied, their riders holding ground behind the gate, ready for the first crack of wood. A spray of fire poured over the stones, painting the walls red and orange. More stones flew in, crashing on the ground and shattering. Bits of rock, like shrapnel, pockmarked the ground. Officers shouted orders at the archers on the ramparts, trying to hold back the onslaught. Over the wall, soldiers readied the catapult with a basket of fire-lit rocks, aiming for the center of the city. They pulled back the lever and let the fiery mass out into the night sky.

Suleiman woke in his bed, sweating. He had had this dream before.

Blue light peeked in through the small, square window in his small, square room. He stared up at the cracks in the ceiling, thinking. This was the third time he had dreamt this dream. Each time was more elaborate than the last. He knew it took place in the distant past, but he couldn't place exactly what time period. It was in the Old City of Jerusalem, of this he was sure. He recognized the Tower of David, a sight he saw every day from his booth in the Old City market in the Christian Quarter. But, he didn't recognize the people. This was the first time he saw people in his dream. Before, it was just a dream full of fire and screams. This time, he saw the soldiers; they wore rounded metal helmets with chain mail underneath. Some wore white tunics imprinted with large crosses, thick, bright and red. Some wore thick chain mail and carried

their bows and arrows at their sides, their pointed helmets covering their faces.

Suleiman couldn't shake the feeling that he was an outsider, looking in at the soldiers in a mixture of fear and hatred. He wanted them out. Sometimes, he felt, just as much as the people on the other side of the wall, the people he still had not seen.

He shook his head, looked at the clock on the cracked plastered wall beside him, and rose from his mattress. He washed his face in a small basin at one corner of the room, and set an aluminum kettle on a gas burner next to the basin for coffee. He brushed his teeth while the water in the kettle boiled. His room was sparse, decorated only with a dog eared calendar. He flipped on the radio while he prepared a cheese sandwich for breakfast, listening for the news. *Israeli forces began a ground invasion of Gaza today, broadening the IDF's Operation Protective Edge in response to Hamas rocket attacks.* The radio reporter sounded dead pan, as though she was relaying news about the traffic. Suleiman listened, indifferent. He wasn't moved too much as long as it did not interfere with his ability to sell souvenirs in the Old City market. He shut off the radio and gathered his things for work.

Outside in the streets, people had already begun their mornings. He passed other merchants on their way to market and greeted them with his customary nod. Suleiman was not very talkative, he liked to be left to himself. This was a strange personality trait to have in Jerusalem, especially in a section that received hundreds of tourists every day. Suleiman was the only merchant who didn't chase down customers; he preferred, instead, to sit by his booth reading the paper or staring off into the distance, until a customer decided to walk up to him. As a result, he did not make much money. His souvenirs were not unique, nor were they less expensive or better quality than the souvenirs of his competitors. Suleiman did not bother with performance; he left that to the other merchants, too. Still, despite this general indifference to the

customer, Suleiman made enough money at the end of every month to afford rent in his small, square room.

Around ten in the morning, Suleiman received his first customer. A small, white woman, who wore a shawl she had just bought from the neighboring booth. Suleiman watched her from the corner of his eye while he read the paper and drank a cup of Turkish coffee. She picked through a basket of blue glass eye charms, running them through her manicured fingers.

“How much?” She spoke in broken Arabic, clearly excited to use her newly acquired words.

“Five shekels.” He responded in English. He wasn’t going to play the role of the excited merchant. Leave that for the actors.

She shrugged her shoulders, placing the glass charm down, careful to remember its place in the basket. She began to argue over the price, but Suleiman cut her off.

“Five shekels, madam. If you are not interested,” he waved his hand to his left, “you may please look through the baskets of my friends in the next booths.”

She looked surprised, not used to such curt behavior. *She is probably used to star treatment*, Suleiman thought, happy to have at least disrupted her entitled European senses. He stared at her hands, which hovered over the charm in the basket.

A man walked up behind her carrying a shopping bag loaded with souvenirs. They spoke in German and the woman pointed to the eye, gesturing to Suleiman. The man picked up the charm from its place in the basket, raising it in his hands.

“You lower price?” He spoke, again in broken Arabic.

“No. I said five shekels.” Suleiman repeated, once again in English. Watching the man’s facial expression turn from hopeful to cross.

He threw the charm down on the basket and grabbed the woman's freckled arm, pulling her toward another booth. Suleiman only shrugged his shoulders, returning to his paper. The couple walked a few steps away before the woman pulled away from the man, returning to Suleiman's booth.

She picked up the charm from the basket and handed Suleiman five shekels, lowering her eyes, not speaking a word. He nodded at her and at the man she was with, adding a small, curt smile to rub in his small victory. The man only turned away, shaking his head.

These little interactions happened daily for Suleiman. He hated every minute of it. He did not like to play the game of tourist and merchant. He hated showing off his wares, shouting for people's attention. He hated how everything was sold in this city; everything was a production, a huge play for the tourists to watch. Sometimes, he wanted nothing more than to drive the tourists out; to reclaim the streets for the people of Jerusalem.

A catapult creaked over the wall. Men shouted for it to be loaded again. A shower of fire-lit rocks rained down on the Tower of David, just like the night before. Pieces of stone cracked and split off the building, crashing to the ground and leaving angry craters in the dirt. Men on the inside of the walls readjusted their helmets and chain mail, fighting back against the constant shower of stone and rock. They spoke to each other in a language that sounded to Suleiman like French, though he couldn't exactly place it; they sounded nothing like the French tourists who visited his booth. Over the wall, Suleiman could make out a few Arabic words in the shouts of the men by the catapult. He became suddenly aware of his own presence, looking down at his hands and dress. He wore a long, brown dress-like tunic with brown sandals over his ashen, dirty feet. The fabric was scratchy, lacking the stretch and softness of the t-shirts he usually wore. He

scratched at his neck, feeling warm and uncomfortable. The army over wall sent another basket of fiery rocks flying over the Tower. A huge rock crashed down a Suleiman's feet and he felt the heat that emanated from it, rising up from his feet and to his belly.

A burning smell rose from the City, the fumes filled Suleiman's nose, waking him from his sleep.

He lay on his mattress once again thinking about the dream. This time, he felt the fires over his head and the dirt under his feet. He lifted his leg up slightly; ashes blackened the tips of his toes. He rubbed his eyes, looked again. His feet were clean.

Suleiman rose from his mattress and prepared coffee. The dream woke him earlier than usual, so he spent the time listening to the radio. *Authorities believe Hamas is responsible for the murders of Naftali Fraenkel, Gilad Shaer, and Eyal Yifrah. Ground invasion of Gaza is expected to continue until all those responsible are captured or killed.* Suleiman shut off the radio. He prepared his cheese sandwich and ate in on his way to the market.

Suleiman walked through the morning crowds in the city, taking his time as he ambled through the streets. He passed by shop owners having coffee at the front of their shops, tour guides leading huge groups of tourists through the winding alleyways, and a group of young boys kicking around a slightly deflated, grimy soccer ball. He paid little attention to the sound and smells, thinking only of his dream. He wanted to know more about the world he had entered; what did it mean?

Not paying attention, Suleiman turned the corner and bumped into a woman. She fell to the floor, her basket of bread scattering all over the ground.

“Forgive me, madam, I apologize-” Suleiman began to say, reaching his arm out to help her stand up.

She knocked his hand away, stooping to pick up the pieces of bread from the ground. He watched her for a moment, realizing her dress was made of the same scratchy material he wore in last night’s dream. He looked at her feet; they were bare and covered in soot.

“Madam, might I ask-” He began to say to her, but she scuttled away through the alley like a scared mouse.

Suleiman tried to follow her, but she became lost in the crowd just as quickly as she had appeared.

*Authorities have reported Hamas is responsible for a series of rocket attacks aimed at Israel. The IDF will do everything in its power to strike all terrorist infrastructure and end the aggression against Israel.*

Suleiman’s radio was on when he stepped back into his small, square room.

“Didn’t I shut you off?” He asked the radio, pressing the “Off” button. The silence that filled the room seemed as if it were poised on the edge of a cliff, ready to jump off into a sea of sound at any second. Uncomfortable, Suleiman turned the radio on again, switching to a music channel instead of the news.

This time, Suleiman was on the rampart wearing a thick, gray tunic and a turban. He looked around, finally able to see over the City walls. A huge army of men, yelling and screaming at the walls, gathered at the foot of Jaffa gate. They raised their spears and bows in the

air, shouting, “Salah al-Din, Salah al-Din!” *Salah al-Din? Could it be?* Suleiman looked around him as arrows flew past his ears and crashed into the stone face of the Tower of David. He looked around for the infamous man, hoping to catch of a glimpse of him in hand-to-hand combat.

Salah al-Din rode through the army of yelling men on a white horse draped in red fabric. He raised his sword in the air and yelled, gesturing for the men to strengthen their attack on the walls of the Tower of David. Suleiman became suddenly aware which side of the gates he was on, and he did not want to be caught with the Crusaders.

He heard a loud, crumbling sound. The wall next to Jaffa Gate had collapsed and soldiers rushed in, their heads down, spears pointed outward. More people ran screaming as fires burned all around the Tower. Horses whinnied and their riders fought one-handed with the Saracens. The clang and clash of metal echoed all around Suleiman, forcing him to waken.

He woke again, in his bed, dripping with sweat.

The next morning Suleiman dragged a bad mood around with him. In the market he was more indifferent than usual; his merchant acquaintance, Murad, noticed, too.

“What’s the news, Suleiman?” He asked, searching Suleiman’s face for clues.

“Nothing,” was all Suleiman said in return.

“Have you got a paper?”

“No, nothing.” Suleiman answered, forcing himself to look beyond Murad and into the crowd. He hoped to see the woman in the scratchy fabric again to ask her how she made it into the beyond.

“*You?* With no paper!?” Murad said, “You must be joking, you’ve always got a paper!”

“Not today,” said Suleiman, pushing Murad’s shoulder to the side to catch a better view of the crowd that walked the street around his souvenir shop.

“Leave me alone, Murad,” Suleiman said while watching the crowd. Murad stood for a while, his hand resting over his rounded belly, until he finally waved Suleiman off and went to a café nearby.

*Hamas spokesperson, Sami Abu Zuhri, warned Netanyahu against the continuation of the ground invasion that began last week. Abu Zuhri says the Palestinian people are not scared and that the invasion will have “dreadful consequences” for the Israeli army.*

That night, Suleiman waited for sleep to find him. He lay on his mattress in the dark, fully clothed with the radio on loud. He waited.

Seconds flicked away.

Minutes ticked away from the hands of the clock.

Hours snuck by and he was still awake, lying on his mattress in the dark.

Finally, sleep arrived.

Beyond the wall, Suleiman stood shoulder to shoulder with a fellow Saracen. A spear shook in his sweaty hands, quivering along with his nerves. The man next to him stood firm, his feet rooted in the dirt at the foot of the wall in front of them. Behind him, Suleiman saw groups of four or five men lifting giant boulders and smaller bags of flaming rocks into catapults. He



watched the archers rhythmically reach for the arrows behind their heads, load their bows and release the arrow at the Tower and walls. He listened as horses neighed, standing up on their hinds legs as their virulent riders shouted orders into the air. He smelled dust, he smelled burning, and he smelled blood.

The wall in front of them crumbled then crashed into the ground, crushing soldiers under huge stones. Suleiman stepped over the bodies of the crushed as he ran inside the City, holding his spear high in the air and yelling, “Salah al-Din! Salah al-Din!”

He stopped at the foot of the Tower, taking in the fighting all around him. Some men stabbed at each other with their swords and spears. Others rode on horseback, running beside large groups and slashing at their arms as they galloped by. Still others ran in on foot, with only hand knives to protect themselves, jumping on the men on horseback, trying to slit their throats with small daggers. Suleiman felt his blood move inside him, guiding his arms and legs toward to clamor. He dashed straight into a fight between a tall Crusader and a shorter Saracen soldier.

The Crusader swung his sword at the two Saracens, the heavy steel tip of the weapon narrowly missed Suleiman’s knuckles. The Saracen soldier stabbed at the Crusader’s horse, aiming for a spot on its neck unprotected by armor. Suleiman stabbed at the Crusader, poking at his legs and trying to unhorse him with the end of his spear.

A flurry of fiery rocks flew past the soldiers, causing the horse to rear back in fear, unseating the knight.

The Crusader rose quickly for a man heavily dressed in chainmail and armor. He swung his heavy sword at the Saracen, swiping the air from left to right. The Saracen dodged each jab, offering his own stab at the knight in return. Suleiman stood, assessing the risk of what he was about to do.

Finally, Suleiman rushed up to the Crusader, whacking him at the back of the knees with the wooden handle of his spear. The knight, startled, turned around without steadying his legs. Suleiman spun his spear around and poked at the knight, aiming for his face which was uncovered.

It was clear to the knight that Suleiman had never fought before.

He steadied his legs and lunged at Suleiman. Suleiman fell to the ground, a cloud of ash and dirt blew up underneath him.

The knight lifted his sword high. It hovered above Suleiman for what felt like hours, shining like a ray of sunlight. Behind the knight, Suleiman could see the City walls, crumbling, the night sky peppered with fiery rocks and stone dust.

The knight's sword crashed down onto Suleiman's shoulder. It dug into his skin and burned his flesh. Again, the knight lifted his sword and brought it crashing down onto Suleiman's other shoulder.

Suleiman watched as the knight hacked into his body. He saw his blood seep into the ground, dying the dirt red. He saw the other Saracen attack the knight and lose, too. He watched the rest of the battle like a mouse, hidden in a corner of the City. No one seemed to see him, nor did anyone seem to care.

The Siege ended four days later and the Crusaders surrendered Jerusalem to Salah al-Din. The captured Muslims were freed and the Crusaders were forced out. Suleiman remained in his corner and refused to come out. He liked it in there, he could see everything, could know everything.

*Thirteen gunmen attempted to enter Israel from Gaza through a tunnel this weekend. The IDF halted the attack and apprehended the men, who organized their group just mere hours after the humanitarian ceasefire was declared. Hamas is taking full credit for the operation.*

In his small, square bedroom, Suleiman lay on his mattress. He lay there for days, weeks, months, years. His radio played, relaying news to the empty corners of the room, until, one day, someone shut off the electricity.

## Bedtime Stories for the Night of June 29, 2014

It was late, almost midnight, when Baba finally returned home from his job at Al-Awda factory. He usually brought treats home for the children, but tonight was different.

The children didn't seem to notice his lack of biscuits. Baba heard their bare feet slapping the tile floor as they ran over to him. Salwa jumped up and curled her arm around Baba's neck.

"Yaba, tell us a story. We can't sleep. Please!" This was how Salwa and Yousef usually ensnared their father into the bedtime ritual of storytelling. Except, this time, things were different. It had been almost three weeks since those three Israeli boys disappeared. Everyone could feel the unsettling shuffle of tension that consumed the streets. The threat of another attack on Gaza lay thick in the air, and the worry was etched out on Baba's face like a Roman bas relief.

"*Habibati*," Baba said, pulling Salwa's arm from around his neck, "please, sleep. I'll tell you stories in the morning, *inshallah*. You have school tomorrow." He sighed and lifted his hand slowly to shut out the overhead light.

Yousef groaned and flopped himself on the *fershe*, a small, thin mattress spread out on the tile floor where he and Salwa slept.

"Please, Baba! Just one story. Please! We were stuck in this stuffy old house all afternoon. Mama wouldn't even let us play in the *saha*!"

Baba looked down at his children. He thought about the kidnapped boys and wondered if the IDF would ever find them alive. Tension filled the streets, even the enclosed courtyard of their building was unsafe for children to play in. Baba wondered about the safety of their cinderblock apartment building.

He sighed again. "Y'lla, come closer. I'll tell you *one* story, *mashe*? And after that, you

have to go to sleep. If Mama catches you awake, she'll go mad."

Baba sat down on the thin mattress. Salwa and Yousef crawled next to him and settled into each of his strong, heavy arms. Salwa's frizzy hair tickled his chin. He smoothed it down and drew her closer.

"So, a story for my little *habla* and *ahbal*? Where should I start?"

Yousef puffed his chest out in defiance of Baba's teasing.

"I'm not silly! I am a whole five years old! I'm a *zalameh*!"

His father laughed. It seemed that children weren't children for long, not anymore. Looking into his son's scrunched up face, he remembered his own father.

"With your face like that, you remind me of someone I knew well. I remember a story I heard about him when he was about your age. Back then, he thought he was a *zalameh*, too. It's called..."

### *Bahjat and the Black Cat*

It was Ramadan in the small village of Burqa and Bahjat was hungry. Outside, the streets were dusty and empty. The shopkeepers nodded off behind their booths, dreaming of the sound of the *maghrib athan*, the call to prayer that signaled *iftar*. The June heat rose up from the unpaved road to Bahjat's house. Back then, in 1942, there was no electricity in the smaller villages. Bahjat didn't even have a radio to distract him from the rumbling of his empty stomach. Bahjat lay on his *fershe* and tried to nap. He tossed and turned and tossed and turned; but sleep would not come. He heard his mother in the kitchen. The smell of garlic and onion wafted through the warm, tiled halls of his house. Bahjat daydreamed of the stuffed eggplants and zucchini his mother was cooking. He imagined swimming in the tomato broth, chomping down on bits of eggplant and rice while carried along with the bubbling, red current.

“Bahjat! Come in here!” His mother shouted.

“*Hadr!*” he shouted back, running into the kitchen.

His mother was in a panic. “We’re out of *khubz*, ya Allah! Your father is going to be so annoyed.

*Ibso’ra*, run to the store and buy some. Y’lla, quickly, *quickly!*”

“Mama! It’s almost *iftar*, I want to stay here. Can we just eat without bread, for once?”

“*Haywan*, would you talk to Baba like that? Y’lla, get to the store before I slap both your cheeks!”

His sisters giggled to one another and teased, “Y’lla, *ya ahbal!* Get to the store!”

“I am not silly! I am a *zalameh!*” He shouted back at them, “Wait ‘til I tell Baba on you two!” But, before he could snap his fingers and knock them both on the head with a click, his mother pressed a few *mil* coins into his palm and pushed him out of the steaming kitchen.

“I *am* a *zalameh*,” Bahjat muttered to himself as he closed the heavy metal door of the house. “They don’t know what I can do; they’re just stupid, *habla* girls.”

He kicked at the loose pebbles in the dust of the street and made his way to the store.

When he returned, it was finally *iftar*, time to eat. After the *athan* sounded and his mother and father finished their late afternoon prayers, they gathered in the living room. They ate, sitting on the floor. The plates spread out across the tiles for what seemed like miles. Chicken soup with rice steamed in a huge pot, stuffed eggplant and zucchini was piled as high as a small hill, and trays of roast chicken with onion were stacked up on top of each other. His uncles and aunts had come over to eat with them and the living room was packed with people chewing, breaking bread, gulping down yogurt, and slurping up soup until it was gone.

After *iftar*, the men lay on the *diwan*, their bellies rounded with food. They talked with thick voices, and pulled out the backgammon boards to begin the night of games. The women

had cleared away the plates and crowded in the kitchen to smoke cigarettes and prepare coffee and sweets. Bahjat's sisters were ushered away to help wash dishes, he was left alone in the living room. Bored, he insisted on staying to watch the men play backgammon. His mother came in with coffee and *baklawas* for the men. Bahjat tried to reach for a sweet but his mother slapped his hand away, "*Ya ahbal*, this is only for grown-ups! Your sweets are in the kitchen."

The men laughed and teased him. He shouted, "I am not an *ahbal*!" He bit down on his tongue to stop from crying, but he could not stop the tears. He ran out of the room and into the courtyard of the house.

"They're all stupid. Stupid grown-ups! Stupid girls! They'd miss me if I were gone, I'll bet they'd cry all day." He smiled as he imagined his mother sobbing into his father's sloped shoulders.

"Maybe they'd all die of sadness. That'd show them." He cheered up at the thought of his sisters crying over his empty mattress.

"I know, I'll run away and live with the *msaharaty*. I'll learn his songs and only I'll come back every Ramadan to wake people up for *suhoor*."

Satisfied with his plan, Bahjat set out of the courtyard into the black summer night.

The village was humming. Bahjat could hear the muffled sounds of people in their courtyards, playing cards and smoking *hookah*, the air full of the sweet smell of jasmine and tobacco. Bahjat followed the winding streets. He knew where Ali, the *msahraty*, lived but tonight, the path felt strange. He followed the blinking lanterns of houses, getting farther and farther away from home. Bahjat began to get sleepy. His belly felt heavy. His eyes felt weighted down with lead.

He followed a low, rock wall that lined the olive grove; he thought he must be close to

Ali's house. He blinked and stared into the darkness of the olive trees – two pinpricks of yellow light stared back at him. He blinked again and the yellow lights got closer, twinkling like stars in the blackness of the grove. He moved in for a closer look, venturing deeper into the darkness. He lifted himself onto the low wall. He had heard stories of people meeting *jinn* and fairies in the night by the olive trees. He thought of all the wishes he could make if he caught one. The pinpricks of light began to get larger and brighter. He felt giddy. He would catch the *jinn* and make it grant him wishes.

Bahjat and the lights played this game for a few minutes. He, moving closer and the lights getting brighter. Finally, Bahjat was in the middle of the olive grove. He didn't notice the darkness and shadows that surrounded him. He was staring straight into the pinpricks of light. Like the yellow beacons of a mosque, lighting the way for worshippers in the dark, dawn hours. The pinpricks came closer. Bahjat could feel warm bursts of air coming out from behind the lights. He could smell the smokiness of burned olive branches and the deep earthiness of soil. He reached out to grab the *jinn*. The darkness felt like a canyon between them. He touched the dark space around the lights, grabbing tight. His hand was met with a soft, furry feeling. Then, the lights mewed. They flashed and mewed again. The lights began to purr and the animal curled around Bahjat, happy to have found a friend in the darkness.

"Stupid cat!" Bahjat shouted, annoyed that he had been tricked by the dark night and his sleepiness. His anger jolted him out of his full-bellied stupor and he realized he was too deep in the dark olive grove. As he walked away, he picked up a small rock and threw it back at the cat, cursing it for tricking him. His back to the cat, he made his way to the wall. Out of the darkness, the rock he threw came hurtling back toward him and hit him at the back of the head – snap! Like that."



Baba flicked his index finger against his thumb and whacked Yousef at the back of the head. “Owww!” Yousef cried, turning to his father and scrunching his face up again. “Baba, that wasn’t funny! Ya *ahbal*!”

“But, who threw the rock back at Bahjat?” Salwa asked, peering up at her father.

“The cat, of course! It was a *jinn* that tricked him.”

“That’s a dumb story,” said Yousef as he rubbed the back of his head. “It’s no fair, you owe us another!”

Baba started to move up from the *fershe*. “No, no, no! One more Baba, please. It’s still early!” Salwa tugged at her father’s arm.

“Early? It’s almost three in the morning!”

“Yes, Baba. It’s early. Early morning!” said Salwa, laughing.

“Ya *za’ra*,” said Baba, “you little monkey. *Tayib*, one more and then we must sleep. I’m getting tired.”

The children clapped their hands, “tell us a funny one, Baba. Something silly.”

“You mean there isn’t enough silliness to go around with you two?” Baba teased. “*Tayib*, have you ever heard of the house that almost ate Amjad?”

### *Amjad and the House*

They called him Amjad al-Taweel, because his long legs and arms looked as though someone had stretched him like dough in a bakery. All week, he worked in a small tailor’s shop in Nablus and, every Thursday night, he walked the thirty miles to Burqa where his family lived. One Thursday, his friend Omar asked him to come to the café for tea and a game of cards.

“*Yla*, Amjad. We haven’t seen you at the café for ages. Come on, I’m buying the hookah.” Omar tugged on Amjad’s arm as they stood outside the closed tailor’s shop.

“Omar, I have to go home. It’ll be dark soon and I have to walk thirty miles!”

“*Khalas*, Amjad.” Omar raised both his hands, shaking his head. “Stop it. Just come to the café, one cup of tea won’t kill you.”

Amjad couldn’t argue any longer. His friend had already begun to drag him toward the café. There, he and Omar played cards and drank tea. More of their friends arrived. Someone suggested they buy a round of hookah. Amjad refused at first, but they insisted. They passed the hookah around for a couple hours. They continued to play cards and drink tea. Someone suggested they buy a round of Turkish coffee. Amjad refused, but they insisted. They drank coffee and smoked cigarettes. They talked about politics, sang folk songs, and played cards.

Night had fallen by the time Amjad left the café. His head buzzed with caffeine and smoke. He began the trek through the sleeping city and toward his parent’s house. After he had walked for about an hour, he heard the sound of footsteps behind him. He picked up the pace. The footsteps grew louder. He began to run. The footsteps behind him grew louder and it seemed as though more than one pair of feet rushed behind him. While he ran, a cackling cracked in the air behind him. The cackles grouped together and rushed faster behind him. In fear, he turned back to see what was following him. The weak light of the crescent moon illuminated the empty road between him and the being – it was a pack of hyenas!

Amjad rushed toward a lemon grove and scampered up the closest tree. The hyenas snapped and laughed on the floor around him. He knew he would not last very long up in the tree; it was low and the hyenas had started jumping. He surveyed the grove. Across the way, almost twinkling in the distance, Amjad saw a house. He scanned the trees around him - they

were close enough to jump to. He stretched his arms and legs outward and jumped from lemon tree to lemon tree like a monkey. Eventually, he reached the house.

The house *was* sparkling in the moonlight because the walls were covered in dew. Amjad touched them, they felt soft and furry. Inside, the house was completely empty. There wasn't even a chair to sit on or a *fershe* to sleep on! He could hear the hyenas cackling getting closer. He pushed open the wooden door and entered the house.

The house smelled like mildew and the walls inside seemed to be heaving, in and out. Amjad tried to settle onto the cold, hard floor. After only a few minutes of fitful sleep, Amjad heard a groaning sound. The walls were moving, shuddering in the dark night. Amjad jumped up to his feet. The floor shifted and shook. He tried to balance as the ground gave way, but he slipped down a slimy tunnel that had opened up in the center of the room.

"Ya mama! Ya mama!" Amjad yelled. He prayed. He begged. He pleaded. He was sure had fallen down the throat of a huge giant that lived underneath the abandoned house.

"Ya Allah! Please save me!"

Something grab his shoulders and shook him hard. That something slapped him across the cheek. Amjad opened his eyes.

He was in the café. It was early morning and the owner was sweeping up last night's cigarette butts.

"Ya *ahbal*," he said, "wake up! You're such a lug. You fell asleep on my diwan and I let you stay. Then, you started yelling and shaking. It's time for you to get out! Y'lla, get out!" Then, he kicked Amjad out onto the busy, morning street.

Salwa and Yousef laughed and rolled around on the *fershe*. Baba looked at his watch and

started to get up.

“No, Baba! Stay with us!” Salwa and Yousef tugged at his arms to keep him from leaving the *fershe*.

“Tell us another story. Just one more, we’re not tired yet,” said Salwa.

Baba sighed and looked at the window in the bedroom. The sky wasn’t as black as it was when he left the factory.

“Tell us a scary one, Baba.” Yousef looked up at his father, puffing out his chest. “I’m a *zalameh*, I can handle the scary ones now!”

Baba ruffled Yousef’s hair, smiling. “Fine, one more story. I’ll tell you a scary one, but you have to promise not to tell Mama I told it to you. She’ll kill me if you have nightmares and can’t sleep at night.”

“We promise, Baba!” Salwa and Yousef said together, in mocking sing-song voices.

“*Tayib*, I’ll tell you about the man in my village that disappeared long before I was born. It’s the story of...

### *Ali and Zainab*

A lonely man, Ali lived by himself in a house at the foot of a large mountain. He worked during Ramadan as an *imsaharaty*. Every early morning during the fasting month, Ali picked up his drum and made his way to the village. He banged on the drum and sang loud songs to wake people up to eat *suhoor*. This Ramadan was no different. Every morning, like clockwork, he strapped the drum to his shoulders and cleared his throat. He walked to the small village singing:

Wake up, you sleepyheads!

Wake up and eat!

Wake up, you lazy bones,  
it's time to fast, not sleep!

He repeated this chant until everyone in the village turned on their lanterns and began setting out the food for *suhoor*. Once he finished, he made his way back to his little house to eat and write the song for the next morning.

On his way back home, he came across Hajj Nazmi, the oldest man in the village, trying to move his donkey on the path.

“*Ahlan*, Hajj Nazmi. May Allah give you many blessings,” said Ali.

“*Ahlan*, Ali. Allah will be giving you many blessings, for sure.” Hajj Nazmi was panting, trying to pull his donkey through the path.

“Here, let me help you,” said Ali. He pushed the donkey’s rear-end while Hajj Nazmi pulled the reins. The donkey refused to budge. It dug its hooves deeper into the soft dirt.

“*Ya haywaneh!* Damn your father, and your father’s father!” cursed Hajj Nazmi. Still, the donkey would not budge. They tried cajoling it with carrots, luring it with sweet well-water, and even slapping its behind with a whip fit for a stallion. Still, the donkey would not move.

“*Khalas*, I give up,” said Ali. He wiped away the sweat that dotted his forehead. The sun was now high in the sky. Ali had missed *suhoor* and his much needed morning water. His throat cracked with thirst.

“Hajj Nazmi, I must go now. Leave your donkey here. I will check on her after *iftar* tonight.”

“*Tayib*,” said Hajj Nazmi, “but be careful walking down this path after sundown. I heard Hajj Abid telling a story about the *jinn* that lives in the cave on the mountain. It tricks men that

walk on this path and steals their souls.”

“That’s just the silly talk of old men, Hajj. No one had seen the *jinn* in a thousand years. I will be fine.” Ali said, patting the old man on the back and starting him on his way. Ali just wanted to sleep off his thirst while he waited for the *Maghreb athan*.

When the *athan* finally called people to prayer and *iftar*, Ali’s throat was red and sore from thirst. He gulped down the sweet water with greed and poured himself another cup. He drank seven cups of water in a row. Soon, he felt that his belly was full of cement. The water sloshed around inside and made him feel sleepy. He decided to lie down until the water settled in his stomach.

By the time Ali woke, the sky was a black blanket covering the town. He jumped up.

“Hajj Nazmi’s donkey! I’ve forgotten all about it, *ya Allah!* I hope the hyenas haven’t gotten there before me.”

He ran to the path outside his house and stumbled about in the dark calling for the donkey. He arrived at the spot where he and Hajj Nazmi had left the poor animal. It was nowhere to be seen. It was too dark for Ali to make out the donkey’s prints in the ground. Ali wrung his hands over and slapped at his face.

“Hajj Nazmi is going to kill me! She was his favorite donkey. I am such an *ahbal*. *Ya Allah!* Please let me find *el-haywaneh!*”

Ali ran around in circles, searching for the animal in between the trees and by the creek. He searched for hours in the dark. Not finding the animal, he shuffled home with heavy footsteps.

On his way back to his little house, Ali heard the sound of a beautiful voice, singing one of his wake-up songs.

Wake up, all you sleepers!

Time to eat, time to drink!

Get up, get up, you lazy bums!

Day is here, the sky is pink!

At first, he thought his tiredness and hunger was making a fool of him.

“It is just my imagination. I need to eat something. It’s almost time to wake people for *suhoor*.”

The singing became louder as he walked toward his little house. Ali thought there was someone inside his house. He blushed at the thought of a young, beautiful woman sitting in his kitchen, singing his songs. But his house was empty and the singing still continued. This time, the beautiful voice rang out with a song he had written years before:

Little village, wipe your sleep!

Wake your children, wake your loves!

Little village, shake your beds!

Hear my voice, hear my drums!

Ali became delirious with curiosity. He wanted to meet the owner of the beautiful voice that sang his songs. He walked outside of his little house and followed the sound of the songs up a rocky trail to the mountain. The sky had turned from black to pale gray and the roosters stirred in their coops. It was time for Ali to wake the village for *suhoor* but he had forgotten all of his duties. He stumbled up the path, the sound of the songs getting louder and louder. He reached a

cave at the top of the mountain. Inside, the voice echoed as loud as the sound of the *athan* that rang throughout the village five times a day. Inside, the source of the voice was on the cave floor.

The sound emanated from the disembodied head of a woman. Her skin was pale blue, her eyes were wild and red, and her hair flowed down on either side of her head like two black waterfalls. Ali crept up, his hands shaking. She stopped singing when she saw him.

“*Ahlan*, Ali. I have been waiting for you to come up here.”

“Excuse me? I don’t even know who or what you are. How do you know me?”

“I am Zainab, *jinn* of the mountain. I ruled the village until the men came. They cut my body up into pieces a thousand years ago. They hid my limbs all over the village and left my head in here to keep people away. I have been waiting for someone to come up here ever since.”

Zainab smiled and showed her teeth; they were black and shiny like a million beetles. Ali gulped down the spit that pooled at the back of his throat. Without a warning, he turned away and tried to run, but a large boulder had moved and blocked the cave’s entrance. Ali turned back to Zainab.

“Please, let me go. I need to wake the village! They will forget their *suhoor* if I am late.”

Zainab did not let him go. She snarled her teeth and said, “No, Ali. You must stay. I have been waiting for a body for a thousand years. I will not let you go. I need to walk, to run, to rule again. You must give me your body.”

Long, black tendrils of Zainab’s hair flew out from the sides of her head. They wrapped around Ali like ropes and pinned him to the ground. They gripped tightly around his limbs. His arms and legs and neck turned white. His eyes bulged in their sockets. His bones cracked. He screamed, but Zainab had begun to sing again, waking the village with her own *msaharaty* song:



Little village, hear my voice!

Time to stir, time to wake!

Set out your jewels, your shiny coins!

I'll have my legs, there's no escape!

"Y'ma! That's a scary story," said Salwa. Her eyes wide, her tiny knuckles white from gripping Baba's arms. Yousef was quiet. He turned to Baba and said, "I don't ever want to live on my own, Baba. You and Mama have to always live with me."

"Ya *ibni*, what happened to being a *zalameh*? Did Zainab scare the grown-up out of you?" He pinched Yousef's nose, "Don't worry, Mama and I will never leave you two alone."

"Do you promise?" Yousef and Salwa were still quiet, tucked in between Baba's arms.

"I promise, *habibati*. I promise."

Salwa yawned and Yousef rubbed his eyes.

"You two look sleepy, just like Ali," Baba teased.

Salwa kicked her legs out on the *fershe*, "Don't say that, Baba! I'm not like Ali. Zainab won't ever get me."

Baba smiled. "Yes, *habibty*. Zainab won't ever get you. I won't let her. But now, it's late. We have to sleep before Mama wakes up."

Baba stood up. He pulled the thin cotton sheet from the foot of the *fershe* over his children, who had settled in to sleep without protest. He knelt down and kissed their warm foreheads.

Outside, the *athan* sounded over the entire city. The night healed like a bruise, moving

from dark purple to lavender. Baba yawned and heard his wife shuffle out of bed, getting up to pray. He stood up and walked over to the balcony to watch the city. It sparkled, bathed in the lavender light.

He saw lights flick on in other apartments. People waking up for the first prayer of the day. Even in the dawn, Baba could feel the tension. He thought about the three Israeli boys as he walked back to the kitchen to turn on the television. The news was still on. More protests. More pointing fingers. Israel blamed Hamas for the kidnappings. Baba thought about his children, thought about his wife.

*“Allah yihmihum,”* he prayed, “God protect them for me when I am unable.”

The city continued to stir.

The sky turned from lavender to yellow.

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