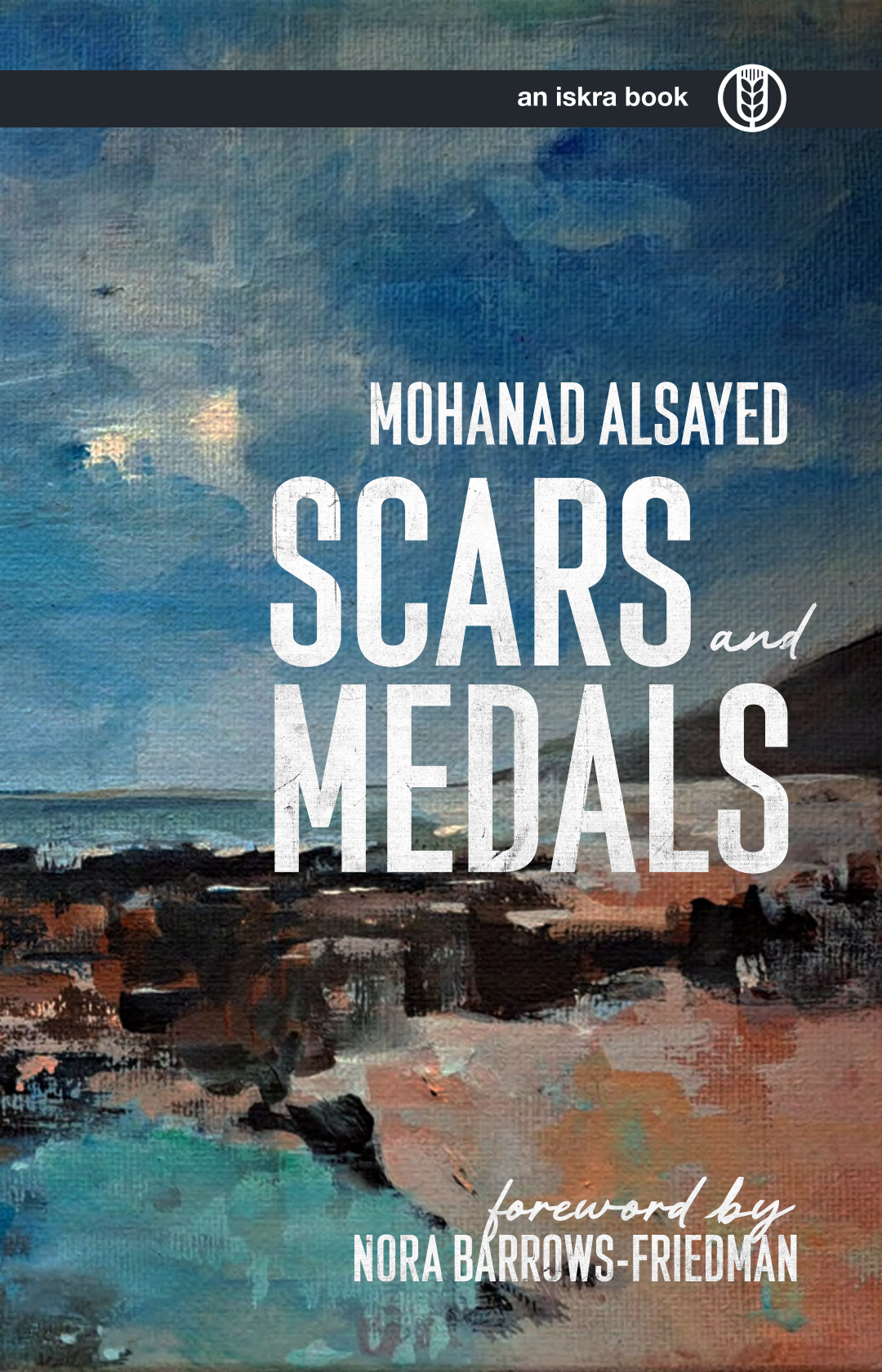
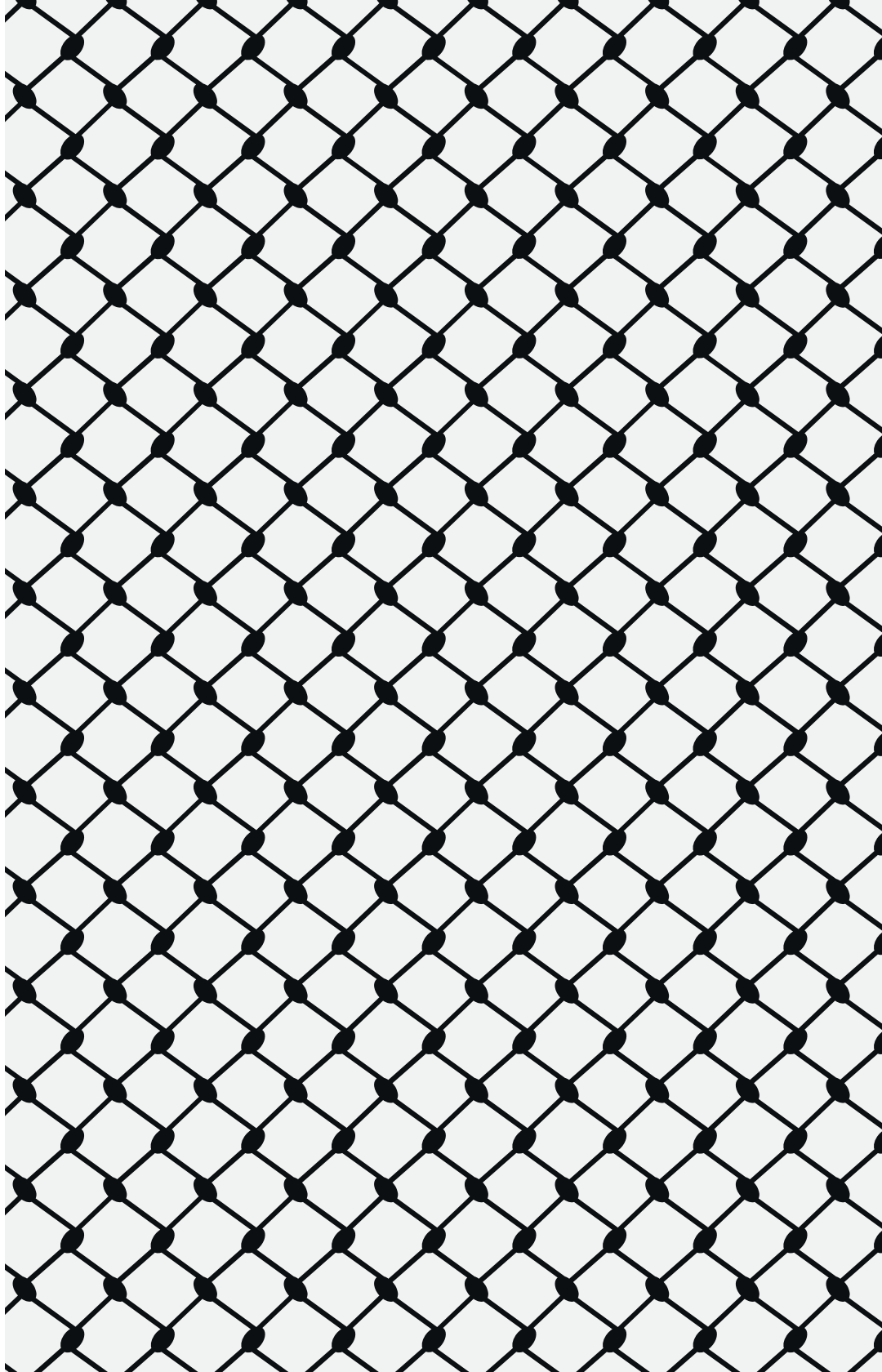

an iskra book
MOHANAD ALSAYED
SCARS and MEDALS
foreword by
NORA BARROWS-FRIEDMAN



Scars & Medals

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For the privacy of individuals whose stories appear in this memoir, certain names and identifying details have been changed. The events described remain true to the author's lived experience.

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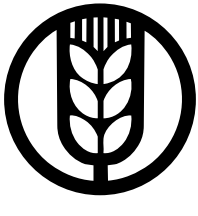
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Scars & Medals

Mohanad Alsayed

Foreword by Nora Barrows-Friedman



iskra books

Dedication

To my family, wife and two princesses whose unwavering support and endless love have been my guiding light. Your belief in me has been the foundation upon which I have built my dreams and our family's future. Putting up with such a complex yet troubled person as myself is not an easy thing may I confess. Let alone spending the rest of your life with that person.

To the memory of my grandmother, you have been a symbol of resistance and perseverance, like my homeland's olive trees and mountains. If one word could sum up why I have a solid belief that Palestine will be free it is you, Jamila.

To my parents, who spent their entire life wishing my siblings and I would live better days than those they lived. Hoping their Naksa[1] was the last of the horrors to face a Palestinian. Little did they know.

To my friends, those who are still alive; they'll be able to read this memoir and relate to events they co lived with me, and those who passed, this work is in your honor. Your companionship has been a source of strength and inspiration.

To the American people, who took me in and gave me a home away from home, gave me the opportunity to be able to dream and strive again after I thought that a Palestinian was not allowed to have regular human feelings and ambitions.

And lastly but not least, to my uncle, whose life and struggles. Laughs and tears. Triumphs and downfalls. Walking aid and glasses, and every little detail in his life and endeavors, was a school that taught me to set a goal and work on it regardless of the roadblocks.

And finally, to the readers, thank you for embarking on this journey with me. Your support and enthusiasm bring these words to life.

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1 The Naksa refers to the 1967 war, when Israel's occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem displaced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and deepened the impact of the 1948 Nakba.

Foreword

by Nora Barrows-Friedman

On one of my very first trips to Palestine, in the summer of 2006, I sat inside a crowded cafe in the Dheisheh refugee camp near Bethlehem, steam from coffee cups and bluish cigarette smoke curling and disappearing into the colorful textiles fastened across the ceiling.

The television was on, at a blaring volume, broadcasting images of concurrent Israeli airstrikes on Lebanon and Gaza. Entire apartment buildings to the north and the south of us were being wiped out. Children were screaming in hospital beds and underneath rubble, their bodies ripped to shreds.

A friend sitting on a chair near me cursed not just the Zionists firing the Western-made missiles from their American warplanes, but the silence of the so-called international community.

"No one notices, no one cares," Mustafa scoffed as he tapped his cigarette into the ashtray. "We are alone in this world."

Nearly twenty years later, his words still cut like a knife. As I write this, Israel has carried out more than two years of genocide in Gaza, killing tens of thousands—possibly hundreds of thousands—of Palestinian children, men and women. Israel co-authored this slaughter with the United States. It has been a systematic, fanatical crusade of settler-colonial destruction of life, of culture, of land. And no one with the power to do so stopped it.

I read Mohanad's manuscript while in the depths of grief and rage about what we witnessed—and keep witnessing—in Gaza and the West Bank. How we begin to make sense of the relentless, sadistic brutality is still beyond me.

This book is a story about deep wounds, about what we cannot make sense of. But it is also a story about repair.

He takes us through the intimate depths of a family's entrenched ag-

ony—a microcosm of layered, incalculable losses that every Palestinian has endured in a myriad of ways. He searches for meaning, and for redemption, and he invites us to explore with him.

His is a search for time that was stolen, a search for his own self, and a search for a beloved family member who initially did not want to be found.

Palestinians have been subjected to countless cruel tortures since Zionism imposed itself onto them a century ago, and among these cruelties is the insistence by the Israelis that a Palestinian's identity, their being, their existence, their history, their belonging to the land, are inconvenient threats.

Mohanad writes about this bitter experience of this realization as a young boy, and spends the rest of his life refusing to accept it. "Resist, even when the odds are against you, even when the consequences are massive," he writes, and in that, he gives an antidote to my old friend's hopelessness, to his (understandable) feelings of alienation and despair.

Even at ten years old, the age my son is now, Mohanad says he "felt the weight of generations of oppression pushing me forward."

I am reminded of the words of the art critic, painter and novelist John Berger, who wrote about visiting Palestine in 2003. I read his short essay just months before I would take my first trip to the West Bank, a trip that would change my life forever.

Berger sat on a rock in a Bedouin village sketching in a notebook, using moistened dust from the ground as pigment. "Those who have been chased out, and those whom there are plans to chase out, are inseparable from the land's living pulse," he wrote. "Without them, this dust will have no soul. That's not a figure of speech, it's the gravest warning."[2]

What a gift to have read this book, at this time, to help us articulate the necessity of strength, resilience and resistance needed to heed that basic warning.

Mohanad's story is part of the soul of Palestine. It is the very pigment that colors that sacred land.

***Nora Barrows-Friedman*, December 2025**

2 Berger, John: "A moment in Ramallah," *London Review of Books*, 24 July 2003. https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v25/n14/john-berger/a-moment-in-ramallah

Home is where the Heart is

Harry Reid International Airport, Las Vegas, Nevada 2010.

There I was, walking into the airport about to take another flight, but it wasn't just any flight this time. This would be my first flight home since I'd left Palestine almost ten years ago. As I approached the security checkpoint, I reached down to pull my wallet from my pocket but found my hand wouldn't stop shaking. I was overcome with nerves. I guess I hadn't realized how nervous I was about returning until now.

My reasons were both valid and traumatizing, but I tried to focus on the many reasons I should be excited about this trip, rather than the myriad of fears clawing their way through my chest. At the forefront of my list of pros, were the people I had left behind. I longed to hug my mother, father, and sister. To reunite with childhood friends—or at least the ones who might still be left alive. I would see my grandmother again and hear her stories. They had always captivated me, from the Palestinian folkloric tales I'd heard as a young boy, to her poignant recollection of the 1948 Nakba—the violent displacement of Palestinians by Zionist militia which resulted in a catastrophic loss of Palestinian life. My grandmother survived, but she was not without scars. It was through her stories that I learned that occupation wasn't just something that you did for a living but could also be something that you lived through. It wasn't only the people that I looked forward to seeing again. There was also the indescribable anticipation of being able to see my homeland, Palestine. I had been in the United States for ten years, and spent a decade becoming "Americanized." I felt very little connection to my Palestinian roots. Until the gum-cracking woman perched behind the security counter attempted to pronounce my name. She frowned in consternation at my ID and made a few valiant efforts, each only marginally worse than the last.

"Mohanad," I said finally, speaking slowly so she could fully appreciate the Arabic pronunciation. The name sounded foreign even to my ears. I had become so accustomed to my given American name: Joseph. Life in Palestine was nothing but a distant memory. I had subscribed to

the American Dream and immersed myself in the culture completely. I was living the good life: I had a thriving career in a business I had built from the ground up. Making this trip would trigger so many memories of a past I'd long left behind, along with all its struggles and atrocities. It was a past I didn't wish to recall, let alone relive.

I passed through security and joined the throng of passengers milling around the duty-free area. I found myself wondering if my family would be proud of what I had achieved, or if they might not approve of all the changes I'd made in my life. Ahead, I spied the welcome distraction of a bookstore, and I plunged inside, desperate to escape the crazy train of thought. I had a long flight ahead and would need a book to occupy my time anyway. Catching sight of myself in a thin mirror decorating a wall between the shelves, I narrowed my eyes at my reflection. At thirty-three I wasn't quite considered middle-aged yet, but I had certainly lost the fresh-faced naivete of my twenties. Taller than average at six foot four, with carefully combed short wavy hair that shone with the luxury hair wax used so liberally by corporate America. I had a good face, youthful and boyish, but handsome—all thanks to the genetic lottery I'd inherited from my parents. I wore an expensive navy-blue suit with a crisply ironed white shirt beneath it—an outfit elegant in its simplicity, but expensive enough for people to notice.

Stepping closer to the mirror, I thought I spied a few white hairs nestled in between the darker strands. Another step closer and my suspicions were verified. I ran a finger across the salt-and-pepperish patch and exhaled. Time had certainly flown. My ten-year stint in the U.S. was starting to show. I wondered why I was only noticing it then. I saw my reflection daily, but perhaps that day, on the brink of my return to my homeland, I was seeing it through the eyes of my loved ones, and noticing the changes they would behold—so insignificant on a day-to-day basis, but so clearly apparent after a decade.

Thinking of my loved ones drew my thoughts once again to Palestine. It's a complex place. Like a passionate lover, it's heady and intoxicating, but also distracting and exhausting. A place that has you exhaling upon departure and then almost immediately wishing you could return.

I wandered around the bookstore, browsing. I wanted a book about business and success, the type of book I had been enjoying. Trump's ***The***

Art of the Deal was at the forefront of my mind. I'd heard good things about it, and I found his story fascinating. His journey from public persona to household name was not without its fair share of controversy, and the book seemed just the ticket to get me through the fifteen-hour flight. The infamous entrepreneur's book sat on a shelf somewhere around waist height, but as I reached out to grab it, a book right above it caught my eye. The title read: ***Palestine, Peace Not Apartheid***, and it was written by none other than former U.S. president, Jimmy Carter.

I hesitated, caught between Donald and Jimmy, but call it fate, call it curiosity I snatched up Carter's book. President trumped businessman, in my books. I could never have guessed the irony of that thought in years to come.

It was only a short walk to my departure gate. I ambled over, pulling my hand luggage behind me, book tucked securely under my arm. My flight to Jordan was clearly visible on the screen behind the attendant's shoulder. Despite the power of holding a U.S. passport, and all the doors it opened, I was still not able to fly home directly. I would land first in Amman, Jordan and then take a road trip to cross the border from Jordan to Palestine.

Only Israelis could fly directly into the region, the rest of us had to queue at the borders. Upon my return, I would forsake all my hard-won American privilege and become again the struggling Palestinian, which included taking more than five means of transportation to travel less than a quarter mile. It also meant that my personalized Samsonite suitcases would be tossed unceremoniously out of the bus each time it stopped. It would be my ongoing task to rummage through the discarded piles of luggage and ensure that mine was checked back onto the next bus. All of this would be performed under the scorching heat of the Jordan Valley sun, which burned with an intensity America seldom witnessed. The insufferable heat would be just one of the many difficulties I would face upon my arrival, and it did not escape my notice that I had become somewhat spoiled living in a first-world country for so long. As I boarded the plane, new book in hand, expensive luggage yet unspoiled, I felt a surge of optimism. Perhaps things had improved in my decades-long absence. Besides, the excitement of seeing my loved ones would surely outshine any minor offenses. I had worked so hard to establish myself,

it seemed that I had come so far from where I started when I first flew to the U.S. ten years ago, that I barely remembered where I had begun.

Home Sweet Home

My arrival at the border tore apart the last fragile shred of optimism I had harbored. I would soon discover that things had not improved on the border, these past ten years. Eventually, we crossed over to the Palestinian side, and finally, into the neighborhood that was both familiar and completely foreign.

"We're here," the taxi driver announced, pulling up to the curb before a row of mismatched houses. This area used to be secluded, with no other houses but ours in sight, surrounded by blooming orchards of olives, oranges, and almonds which we'd stuff into our mouths by the handful, ruining our dinner.

"I... I don't know which is mine," I muttered, ashamed that my memory of my childhood home had become so blurred with time that I could not pick out my parent's house.

Unfazed, the driver stopped a group of kids who were passing by and asked them in Arabic which house belonged to the Alsayeds. The boys pointed at an older house, and the taxi crept forward until we were parked right outside. I eyed the house dubiously. It didn't evoke any memories. The driver turned to me, slightly impatient.

"This is it," he snapped. "This is your home."

I dragged myself from the depth of the backseat, barely able to stand after spending close to two hours in the beat-up car with no air-conditioning. I was sweaty, dusty, and exhausted, which I suspect had addled my brain. My fifteen-hundred-dollar suit was crumpled, and so was my face.

I looked again, focused on the humble dwelling before me, and, to my utter relief, my mind started to fill in the space between then and now. The house had changed and looked different from how I remembered it, but I did remember. That familiarity finally brought a smile to my face.

I paid the taxi driver and helped him to offload my luggage. I eyed my Samsonite cases ruefully. They had seen better days.

As the taxi pulled away from the curb, the front door opened, and my grin broadened. My father stood in the doorway, my mother right beside him. Around their legs, two small children circled, cheering, "Uncle has arrived! Uncle has arrived!"

I briefly embraced my dad, wanting to get to my mom as soon as possible without being disrespectful. I hugged her for a long time in that doorway. I didn't release her until my father said, in a voice that wasn't quite steady, "Come on in, son." To cover his emotion, he hastily added, "Let him catch his breath, Montaha."

My mother let me go, but she stayed close.

My parents had aged. It was obvious, as I looked upon them, that the years had carved new lines into their faces, and the wooden cane that my father leaned heavily upon. He still retained his sharp and serious good looks—a dead ringer for Sean Connery—and his boyish charm. My mother's wrinkles were less pronounced, but she'd always taken care of herself. A strikingly beautiful woman, with ebony hair and chocolate eyes that could look right through to your soul, she would still turn heads.

The children belonged to my sister, Sama. The only girl in a family with four sons, she was the apple of our father's eye, and every one of her brothers felt the same. Sadly, I wouldn't be seeing any of my brothers during my stay. Our family, like most Palestinian families, was scattered across the globe. To escape catastrophe, I'd ended up in the USA, while two of my brothers had settled in Canada. The third lived in Dubai. I also had uncles and aunts all over the world. A few remained in Palestine, but many had fled to neighboring and nearby countries such as Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. I even had a maternal uncle who had been chased out of Palestine and had gone as far as Sweden in Europe before he'd disappeared, another victim swallowed up by the tragedy of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Of those who had left, some were permitted to return to Palestine for limited-time visits, but others had been banned from entering altogether and hadn't been back since they'd fled in the sixties.

My mother let me go long enough to take a quick shower. Thirty minutes later, she perched beside me on the sofa in the living room, the

air conditioning turned up to full power sent a cool breeze through my still-damp hair. In the West Bank, a shower is often the only effective way to cool down, and that day was no different.

Sama and her husband sat opposite us, leaning into one another in that natural, intimate way that married couples often do, smiling fondly down at their boys, who were running wild around the house. They had been delighted with the toys I had brought—Toy Story action figures that were all the rage in the States with the recent release of the third movie. I had chosen Buzz Lightyear for the older boy, Ghazi, while his younger brother, Rajaee, got Woody.

The conversation flowed easily, and we caught up on so many things that first day. We laughed gaily when sharing happy news but grew somber when discussing the tragedies that had befallen so many of the people I'd known. All the while, my mother stayed close, as though if she took her eyes off me for too long, I might vanish once more.

Dinner was wonderful—traditional Palestinian fare lovingly prepared by the women of the household. With a full belly and a happy heart, I turned to my mother and stated my intention to visit my Grandmother Jamila before the sun had set on that day.

She didn't deny my request to be excused, but her mouth tightened, almost imperceptibly. She knew how much Jamila meant to me, but that didn't mean she was happy for me to leave so soon after my arrival. "Ghazi can show you the way," my sister suggested, gesturing at her older son.

I accepted the offer gratefully, not trusting myself to remember the directions after my earlier lapse in memory, and so without any further delay, Ghazi and I set out for my grandmother's house.

As it turned out, Jamila lived only a few houses away. She had broken her hip a few years previously and become bedbound, forcing her to leave the house she had spent most of her life in and move into a smaller place close enough for my mother to take care of her.

I paused outside the door to gather my thoughts. This was a big moment for me, a reunion almost as important as the one with my mother. Jamila had been so near and dear to my heart since I was a little boy. For as long as I could remember, she had been my favorite person, and despite her best attempts to hide it, I'd always known that I was her favorite grandchild.

The sun was slipping away in the west, afternoon giving way to evening, and with it, mercifully, the temperature had dropped substantially, though it did little to calm my nerves.

Ghazi was gazing up at me with confusion.

"Are you going to...?" he gestured at the door.

Nodding, I took a deep breath and knocked.

"Come in," a voice called. I'd recognize that voice anywhere, I thought. I reached for the door handle, then, thinking better of it, I pushed Ghazi gently ahead of me, so my grandmother would see him entering the house first.

And I came trailing right behind him.

Jamila was sitting upright in her bed, a stack of pillows propped carefully behind her back—no doubt my mother's handiwork. The bed had been moved to the far corner of her living room, across from which sat a set of couches and some other simple furniture. I sent silent thanks to my mother for her boundless compassion. Being bedridden, it would have been cruel to confine Jamila to a bedroom.

My grandmother's eyes softened at the sight of her great-grandchild but widened when she caught sight of me behind him.

"Salam," I said softly, offering her the traditional Arabic greeting. "Do you perhaps know who I am?"

Clapping a hand to her chest, she gave a start of gleeful recognition.

"Mohanad!" she gasped. "I have been waiting for you a long time, my dear."

I was at her side in an instant, kissing and hugging her with all the glee of a grandson who has yearned for a decade for his grandmother. I perched on the edge of that bed for at least two hours, absorbing every word she uttered. Some new news blended in with the old familiar stories, and I couldn't get enough of either. We sipped hot tea that I brewed in her kitchen for both of us.

"This will never be as good as the tea you used to make over the wood fire," I remarked, setting my cup aside.

"That's because I flavored it with lemon leaves from the orchard,"

she said and laughed at the memory. "Ah, those were the good old days, Mohanad. But sadly, they are long gone." She glanced ruefully down at her legs. "As you see, these days I cannot even get up onto my feet."

I held her hand, and smiled, trying to hide my dismay. It would do her no good to know how shocked I was. My grandmother had always seemed larger than life—able to move mountains. After my father, she was the person I looked up to the most, the strong and capable heroine of my childhood. To see her crippled was heartbreaking, but it was a heartbreak I would bear in secret. I held it together and broadened my smile. Sitting with my grandmother, it dawned on me afresh, just how much I had missed while living abroad. Most painfully, the years I had lost with her while she was still in good health. Knowing I would not be around to take care of her or offer comfort in her final days, was gut-wrenching. But unfortunately, to survive, I had to adopt a new culture and find a new way of living. So many of our old ways would be lost with my grandmother's generation and it made my heart hurt because this is not what we would have chosen, had we ever been offered the choice.

Old Friends

Through the power of social media, I was able to locate many of my childhood friends. One of these friends, Sam, had been a classmate for many years, and a close friend right up until the time I left for the U.S., still lived in the area. I reached out and he agreed to meet me at a nearby coffee shop.

While I was preparing to go out, I rummaged through the closet in my temporary room. I had brought four suits with me but felt ashamed to show them off. The people who lived in this neighborhood were afforded little privilege, and my expensive clothes suddenly didn't feel appropriate. Living in the U.S. had afforded me a better life—the 'land of opportunity.' In dressing for my meeting, I opted for blue jeans and a simple white T-shirt. I left my expensive watch and designer glasses behind, too.

Coffee shops in Palestine are a little different from those in America. Other than socializing and a bite to eat, they are used for playing cards, watching sports, and smoking hookah—the flavored tobacco so favored in The Middle East. The shop Sam had chosen was on the second floor of one of the newer buildings. I climbed the stairs and entered a large hall filled with tables. Male patrons, young and old, surrounded the card tables, and clouds of smoke—a blend of cigarette and hookah—hovered above. I stood in the doorway for a moment, my eyes scanning the room for Sam. A few seconds later an employee carrying a tray of drinks stopped to ask me if I needed help. A cigarette dangled from his mouth, and he had the air of a man who would quickly run out of patience.

"I'm looking for Sam Najeed," I replied.

"The engineer?" The cigarette bounced along with his words, and he narrowed his eyes against the rising coil of smoke.

I nodded, though truthfully, I had no idea.

The waiter nodded. "Follow me. He usually sits at the window right at the back." He led the way, balancing the trays of empty glasses like a pro.

I followed behind him, almost tripping over my own feet when the crowd erupted in cheers. A soccer game was being televised on the small screens mounted along the walls, and every time the Argentinian player, Messi, scored, the football fanatics would be on their feet, yelling and fist-bumping in celebration.

Sam must have seen me coming before I even noticed him. He got to his feet and dropped his hookah hose.

"Mohanad!" he yelled, raising his hand in the smoky air.

I grinned.

Before that afternoon I wouldn't have believed it possible to catch up on a decade's worth of living in the space of a single evening, but Sam and I made it happen. We spoke about our families, mutual friends, our careers, and of course, we reminisced about our own misspent youth and childhood antics. Some memories weren't so pleasant—facing down death and living to tell the tale when so many of our friends hadn't been so lucky. Sam and I had done it together, often.

At some point during our conversation, midway through a particularly fruity-flavored hookah pipe, the sound of semi-automatic gunfire popped, and judging by the volume, it came from not too far from where we sat. Reflexively, I ducked down, cowering beneath the table. Sam only turned calmly toward the window to search for the source of the sound.

"I see you've turned into a snowflake living in the U.S.," he laughed. "Those shots are coming from the apartheid separation wall, which lies between our city and the Israeli areas."

I climbed out from beneath the cheap wooden surface. It would hardly have served as any sort of protection anyway.

"Is it safe to stay?"

He shook his head.

"Probably not. These sorts of things never end well, it's probably best if we get home before things turn ugly—" Before he could even finish the sentence, another round of shots went off.

"Time to go," I agreed. As one, we got to our feet and left.

The Missing Uncle

My trip home was a whirlwind, and over before I knew it. The thought of leaving was, as always, bittersweet. I would miss everyone so much—more so, now that I had become reacquainted with them—but a part of me also craved the ignorance that distance brought with it. While I was safely ensconced in the U.S. it was easy to forget just how bad things were in Palestine. The crack of gunfire was softer in my memory, the lines on my grandmother's face shallower. On the eve of my departure, I went to see her for one last time, to say my goodbyes.

We were drinking the black tea that I had prepared. It had become a habit during my stay, something I did automatically when I arrived. I looked at her tired, wrinkled face, her hazel eyes deeper set than they had been in her younger years. She was over eighty, and bedbound, with fragile bones and a broken hip that just wouldn't heal. I couldn't say for sure whether she would still be here when I next visited, and the thought was a somber one. Her physical deterioration, however, had not affected her mind. Her memory was as crystal clear as that of a fifteen-year-old, evidenced by the startling clarity of detail she recalled every time she took a trip down memory lane.

That evening, we traveled sixty-two years into the past, as she recounted the catastrophic events of when they got kicked out in 1948 and again in 1967. She explained how she and my late grandfather had fluctuated from landlords to refugees, time and again, and yet somehow, they had still managed to pick themselves up, mend their wounds, and rebuild. In a world filled with chaos, they kept starting over.

When she stopped speaking, Jamila gazed at the ceiling for a long minute, as though recalling some difficult memories. Out of respect for her feelings, I didn't interrupt that silence. When she finally dragged her gaze downward, her eyes were glazed with tears.

"Now that you are an American citizen," she began tentatively, "you can travel through Europe freely, right?"

"Yes." I nodded with a small smile. I hoped that the knowledge

might comfort her sorrows a little.

"Your uncle, Ghazi..." she trailed off and I frowned, wondering where the conversation was headed. I had heard of Ghazi—her son—but had never met him. My nephew was named in his honor. To my knowledge, he had been missing for over forty years.

Jamila steeled herself, drawing in a steadying breath.

"Do you think perhaps you could look for him?"

"Grandmother..." It was my turn to hesitate. "Surely, he's... I mean, it's been forty years, you don't believe he's still—"

"He's alive," she countered before I could finish. "I know he's alive."

Her certainty was surprising, the request even more so. Of all the favors I might have anticipated, I wasn't expecting her to ask for that. Considering the circumstances under which he left, and the length of time since she'd last heard from him, the chance that he might still be alive was slim.

I longed for a way to help my grandmother and to bring her peace, but the request was impossible. When my uncle left, my mother was still a child. We hadn't heard a word from him in twenty years—no letter, no phone call, no contact whatsoever. If Ghazi was alive, he would be in his late sixties, and if he hadn't been found yet, he probably didn't want to be found. How was I supposed to search in a foreign country and look for a man who had been missing for decades? A man I had never even met. The only record I'd ever seen of him were pictures from when he was eighteen years old[3]—taken right before he'd fled Palestine.

All these thoughts whirled in my mind, but I kept them to myself. How could I say no to a woman who'd lost and sacrificed so much? My grandmother was the kind of woman who would rather go hungry than deny her family even the smallest indulgence.

"Of course," I said, smiling even though I was filled with doubt. "I'll do everything I can to find Ghazi for you. Whatever it takes."

When I returned to my parents' house, I spoke with my mom until late in the evening and we agreed to search for anyone who could shed some light on Ghazi's whereabouts.

3 Ed. Note: Not the same picture as shown on p. [X]

Jamila

The City of Tulkarm, 1987

2ND MATERNAL GRANDFATHER, Hussein Younis, passed away when I was only four years old. I could barely remember what he looked like, but I recalled that my older brothers and I used to wait for him to come back from the farmland after dark because he always had candy in his pockets. He'd buy it, especially for us, from the little shop right next to the mosque on his way home. My grandmother, Jamila, lived in one of the few houses close to ours, and we saw her often. She loved every one of her grandchildren, but she held a special place in my young heart.

Before anyone else had stirred, Jamila would be in the backyard behind her simple country house, feeding the chickens and collecting their eggs. My grandmother was not a woman to shy away from physical labor and was one of the most hardworking women I have ever known. It was she who taught me the value of a job well done. She would milk the sheep to make yogurt, feta, and cottage cheese. Every morning she would herd the sheep and their lambs from the little barn on the side of her house to the farmland so they could go to pasture. I can still see her in my mind's eye, a line of livestock trotting in my grandmother's wake down the road as they made the fifteen-minute journey.

My grandmother had four children, though she'd wished for many more. She suffered several stillborn births on her journey to motherhood, each a heartbreaking loss, but her perseverance produced two healthy boys, and two healthy girls, each the pride of their parent's lives.

My mother's sister married a man who lived in Jordan and served in the Jordanian army. He died fighting Israelis in the battle of "Karama" in 1968. While I sympathized when I heard of the tragedy, I had never known my aunt. Since she had been living in Jordan during the 1967 census, she had lost her Palestinian status.

My maternal grandmother also had two sons. The youngest became a doctor whereas the elder of the two, Ghazi, became an activist in resisting the occupiers. At the tender age of eighteen, he was driven out of

Palestine by the Israelis. He is still missing to this day.

Now that I am a father myself, I don't know how my grandmother coped with Ghazi's disappearance all those years. All through my childhood, I was unaware of her pain. I spent so many days with her, working on the farm. On irrigation day, she would bring me along, gifting me a small toy pickaxe so I could "assist" with the workload when in reality, all I did was enjoy the scenery and play in the water running down the canals. Sprinting between orange and lemon trees, I would chase butterflies and try without success to catch birds that came down to drink from the puddles that collected around the citrus trees. I'd throw myself over the water canals and would fall in just as often as I didn't. It only added to the allure, as did the delicious breakfast we would have under the shadows of the ancient trees. I would have the greatest time of my life when grandma took me with her. She taught me from an early age the love and connection with the land. We nurtured the land, acting as its custodians, and in return, it provided us with all the wealth and sustenance we might need. Of course, as a child, I had little appreciation of what it had been like for my grandmother to have lost her homeland, and been forced to rebuild, several times over. But soon, our family's history of loss would rise again, forcing its way into my world.

I was ten years old during the first Intifada. My grandmother was irrigating her orchards, and I was set to go and visit her, much to my mother's concern.

Jamila worked mostly by herself as all other employees would not risk breaking the curfew imposed by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF or IOF - Israeli Occupation Forces). The consequences were too high to justify it.

Whether it was a hot day, cold day, raining, or even on the bloodiest days when the air smelled like tear gas and there was shooting all around the orchard, my grandmother went about her business. She would travel to and from her house, walking the normal route out on the side of the street with her lunch basket balanced on her head, followed by her animals. It was something few would dare to do during the curfew.

The orchard wasn't too far from where I lived, and I would be far from the main roads, but the journey involved me walking through the

olive tree orchard surrounding our house, and then across a barley field we used to play soccer in after the harvest season, before crossing through the Tulkarm refugee camp and into my grandmother's orchard.

"This is going to be the last time I'll be able to visit grandmother's field before the school break is over," I justified. My mother wasn't keen at all, but after fifteen minutes of begging, she agreed to allow me to go and join Jamila.

In my old backpack, I carried a Coca-Cola bottle filled with cold water, as well as lunch for me and my grandmother.

My mother watched me leave with a fearful expression marring her beautiful face, and I waved back to reassure her. Being so young, I was quickly distracted, and as I slipped between the olive and almond trees, my thoughts drifted to the tea my grandma would make for us upon my arrival. Brewed on a wood fire and flavored with fresh lemon leaves, it was one of my favorite drinks. When I passed the barley field, I ducked, so as not to leave my head exposed. Beyond the field lay a road that I would need to cross to reach the Tulkarm refugee camp, which towered over my grandmother's orchard. It had been a hot spot in the clashes with the IOF and fighting had been getting more tense in the past weeks, that is why the curfew was implemented, to keep every resident of the refugee camp inside their simple houses. Violators of the curfew would be shot at without mercy. The road wasn't a wide highway, just a dual-way with dirt shoulders, so all I needed to do was cross those fifty feet to safety—such a simple task that I had done countless times before. I didn't even look around before I plunged forward.

Thinking back, I often wonder if I would have seen them, if I had only taken the time to scan my surroundings. There was no way to know, but I had only taken a few short steps on the tarred surface when a noise to the left caught my attention. I sent up a thousand fervent prayers in the time it took to turn my head, and a thousand fervent prayers went unanswered. It was no group of brave farmers going about their work—or stupid ones, for that matter. It was an IOF squad. A few leaned casually against a nearby wall, while others were seated within their open-top military vehicle. They had been hidden from my sight because they had pulled up near the wall, seeking shade.

The second they saw me, their rifles went up. In raised voices, they yelled for me to stop and come their way.

"Taa'moud, bouyna!"

Basic Hebrew words, but I understood them loud and clear.

They translated to: "Stop, come here!"

It also meant that I was in deep trouble.

They were too close for me to attempt an escape, and I was too stunned to move. As I stood there, blood draining from my face, they started to laugh. It was only then that I noticed the warm patch in my pants, quickly turning cold. To my horror and embarrassment, I had wet myself.

With trembling legs, I approached as ordered. As I got nearer, I noticed that most of the soldiers were young, in their early twenties, a few still in their late teens. Regardless of age, each was well-armed and wore the same combat gear and army green uniform. They stood tall before me—giants in the face of my boyhood. They asked me why I was outside and where my home was. I pointed across the field—it was so close, and yet seemed so impossibly far. Then they asked me to open the bag to see what was in it. With grave seriousness, they instructed me to walk in the middle of the street, in front of their jeep. As I walked, they started the engine, and the Jeep began to roll in my wake. Revving the engine, a terrifying roar at my back, they yelled at me to go faster. I can't remember how fast I ran. I don't know if I fell or not, but I made it back to the entrance of our property with grazed knees and wet pants. As I sprinted inside, I could hear their awful laughter, echoing in my ears as they continued down the street, the mighty engine growling its departure.

This is our land, I thought angrily, but I was more disgusted by my cowardice than their cruelty.

As soon as I could catch my breath, I took a few huge gulps of water from the bottle I had stored in my backpack.

Then I raised my head. Home to the left, my grandmother to the right. I realized that I was at a crossroad. I could walk back home, defeated, or try one more time to get to my grandmother's orchard. If I was caught a second time, the punishment would be far worse than wet pants and bloodied knees.

Terror raised its hideous head, but I felt something shift inside me. I made a conscious choice—the same choice that my grandmother had made, the choice made by my people a long time ago: resist, even when the odds are against you, even when the consequences are massive. I had only been alive for one short decade, but I felt the weight of generations of oppression pushing me forward.

I took a knee in the dirt and grabbed a handful of sand from the trail, spread it on my wet pants to dry the stain, and then rose to my feet with a new sense of purpose. I turned right and started marching. I took the same route I had taken the first time. This time, however, I made sure to stop at the edge of the barley field, to observe the road and make sure no one was there. I took a quick peek behind the wall to check for any lurking IOF soldiers. Then, finally, with a deep breath and grim determination, I crossed the road into my grandma's orchard.

When Jamila saw me, she immediately noticed how sweaty, rough, and miserable I looked. "Habibi!?" she exclaimed, using the endearment she often called me by, meaning loved one. "What on earth happened to you?"

"Nothing," I said, smiling to try to reassure her. "I just fell on my way over here."

And with those words, the memory was locked away, never to be spoken of again, just like many other events that would come later. These moments were difficult to live through once. I had no desire to relive them again. Hovering around the wood fire, waiting for the teapot to boil, my grandmother said, "You remind me so much of your uncle Ghazi when he was your age. He was an innocent child, though he was a little tougher than you, but you have the same spirit."

I shook my head. My uncle was a legend in our family—the ultimate resistance fighter.

"I wish," I sighed, thinking of the fear that had immobilized me that afternoon. "I'd be lucky to become half as courageous as he was."

"He wasn't born brave, Mohanad," she said. "He was just like all other kids, soft and playful. A tough life is what caused him to become the man he became."

I nodded as though I understood, but I didn't. A child could never fully understand the cost of that strength. The scar tissue must be built up, one tiny cut at a time.

So, I nodded and smiled, and secretly hoped to become as strong and tough as my uncle had been.

Unpleasant Memories

My grandmother knew what it was like to live life with a full heart, while also knowing that at any moment, everything could be taken away. She and my grandfather had lived in Yaffa right by the ocean. They were very happy, they couldn't ask for more. My grandfather's business was thriving. He had bought a substantial amount of land as an investment to produce wheat. Jamila once told me that she had lived in a house overlooking the ocean, in a great community where neighbors and relatives were close and took care of one another. Until the enemy arrived and kicked everybody out.

Jamila shared the past with me and explained how terrorist Zionist gangs would arrive early in the mornings, a few hundred of them in military vehicles, armed with rifles, and bombs. Using megaphones, they



Images of the Deir Yassin Massacre

would gather all residents of the town out in the main courtyard. Then they would gun everybody down. She explained that when they heard the news about the massacres, she and my grandpa, along with many of the people in their neighborhood, took off by whatever means possible—be it on foot, by animal, or in vehicles.

Her words rang in my ears.

"We fled, taking nothing with us but some cash and the clothes we wore. Back then I had two children, your aunt Hala and your uncle Ghazi. Hala was only three years old at the time, Ghazi not even one. We left everything behind. There was no time to pack or gather our belongings, which was especially difficult because we didn't know if we would ever be allowed to return."

This forced displacement happened to all the Palestinians who survived the terrorist attacks on all the cities and villages in which Palestinians resided. That year, more than seven hundred and fifty thousand Palestinians were displaced—their towns, cities, and villages forfeited and turned into settlements which would eventually become Israeli towns and cities. None of the original citizens were permitted to return.

Those seven hundred and fifty thousand refugees now number close to five and a half million, living in refugee camps in multiple countries, including the camp near my grandmother's orchard. These refugees still consider themselves the righteous owners of the land and hope that one day they will be able to return, especially since many have no status in the countries in which they have sought refuge. Some cannot leave the refugee camps they are in. Many don't even have travel documents. It is an ongoing problem that has never been solved.

Sitting around our lunch and tea that day, I asked my grandmother the million-dollar question.

"Why did you leave?" Why didn't you resist, was the implication Jamila heard beneath the words.

She smiled, a small, sad smile that barely lifted the corners of her lips. "Times were different, then, Habibi. People were very tired and beaten after long years of war."

It was a simple answer, but it was the truth. War wears down even the strongest among us.

I came to learn later that England had been militarily occupying Palestine for around thirty years in what they called the Mandate. During this siege, they made certain that Palestinians had no weapons left with which to defend themselves, and they also protected and worse, armed, all the new Jewish Zionist arrivals from Europe. As a result, they were able to establish camps that were well-organized, well-funded, and fully weaponized. The monsters coming off the ships in huge numbers every day were handed weapons as they arrived.

My eyes were opened learning about this. I needed more information, and more clarity because it didn't make sense.

"You're saying you were left to face Jewish groups alone, with no means to defend yourselves?"

My grandmother nodded, but I sensed there was more to her suffering than she was letting on.

"What did they do to you?" I asked, my voice barely more than a whisper. I wasn't so sure I wanted to know the answer. Jamila's lips tightened, but she took a deep, steadying breath and replied, "A lot of terrible things happened around that time, it would be impossible to recount it all. Suffice it to say we lost many family members and loved ones."

At my prompting, she went on to relay how the terrorist gangs had started emerging from their camps with arms and bombs, and how ruthlessly they had attacked the Palestinian towns and cities. No one was spared, men, women, children, the elderly—they all died. Every person spotted was killed in horrific acts of ethnic cleansing.

"It caused mass panic in the unarmed residences of the neighboring towns," Jamila explained. "That is when we fled, leaving everything behind."

"I'm sorry, Grandmother." I didn't know what else to say.

She gave a deep, sad sigh, and when she spoke again, her voice broke with the pain of her loss. "I lost most of my family that lived in Deir Yassin."

This was the first time I had seen my grandmother so vulnerable. She was always so strong, she kept everything together: her home, her orchard, her kids, the community. To be entrusted with these painful, and sacred memories made me feel truly grown up. The truth was no longer going to be hidden from me.

Even so, I hesitated to ask her the million questions I had in my head. Questions about her past experiences, and her relatives who were murdered, as well as about how she was able to turn things around and rebuild her home and start a new life in our city of Tulkarm.

But my grandmother knew me well. She read the questions in my eyes.

"Ask me what you want to know, Habibi."

So, I did. I asked her about Deir Yassin, a name I had heard a lot but didn't know anything about.

She paused only to take a sip of tea, and then she began to tell me the story of Deir Yassin. My grandmother's ability to tell stories was fascinating. She would use a lot of body language, change her voice to invoke the narrative, and act out events. This time, however, the story was raw, real, and intimate—an emotional tale that caused her to relive the events and memories of loved ones lost. She wept many times, and I held her through each heart-rending breakdown until the tears subsided.

What I learned that day, combined with what I was able to gather about this event later was nothing short of horrific. The peaceful town of Deir Yassin was significant due to its location—less than a mile west of Jerusalem. This proximity was also its curse. The town was located on the main road which led to Jerusalem. Because of this accessibility, terrorist Zionist gangs of Irgun and Stern committed a massacre there in 1948, during which they killed two hundred and fifty of the six hundred helpless villagers—unarmed men, women, and children. Their only motive for this mass murder: to build a settlement called Jibaat Shoal. The Zionists approached the town early in the morning and used megaphones to instruct the villagers to gather in the main courtyard. The villagers were then lined up against the walls, and executed, one by one, by firing squad. The soldiers went into every home, one house at a time, to make sure no survivors remained. It was a despicable ethnic cleans-

ing massacre. The few who survived those towns, and the ones who fled from nearby towns, became refugees in the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and other parts of the world. They became stateless refugees, to make way for the stateless Zionists coming from overseas. As to those gang members, they evolved later to become the nucleus of the IOF.

That conversation with my grandmother greatly impacted me, though I was still left with more questions than answers. The mass murder of Palestinians was systematic. Those European Jews who suffered mass killings throughout Europe didn't have the right to subject another nation to the same injustice they had experienced.

That evening I made sure my grandmother walked me to the private entrance of my parents' house before she headed home. I was, after all, still just a boy, and my courage could only last so long. She delivered me safely, and then turned back, animals trailing in her wake.

Life in the Fast Lane

Las Vegas, Nevada, 2012

I returned to the U.S. from Palestine, more determined than ever to build a life that would, in some small way, right the wrongs that had been done to my family, and to replace some of what had been taken from us.

I left the corporation I worked for and started my own business—a risky move, but necessary for me to be able to excel. True financial freedom required me to be my own boss, but that came with a price, and the amount of time I had to spend on the business in its first sixteen months was ungodly.

Mutasim was a friend I'd grown up with in Palestine, who moved to the U.S. a few years after I did. He was a brilliant baker, well-experienced in making a wide variety of breads, cakes, and pastries. His family had owned the most famous bakery in Tulkarm, and Mutasim had grown up working there. Initially, he had learned his family's special recipes but as he got older, the student became the master and Mutasim surpassed his elders to become the best. Mutasim was ready to start a business as well, so together, we opened a bakery. I had also gotten married, and my wife and I were expecting our first child in a few months.

One night I was up late, working at my home office, surrounded by paperwork. I had business matters to attend to, but my heart wasn't in it. I had not forgotten the promise I had made to my grandmother and so I decided to use my time making a few international calls. I had to be considerate of the time difference so I could catch up with people during their daylight hours.

I was still making inquiries, searching for my uncle Ghazi. I was talking to anybody I could think of who had lived in Europe around that time or anyone I might know who lived in Sweden currently. So far, I came up empty-handed.

I hung up the phone and rubbed my face, feeling frustrated. It was an emotion I was becoming far too accustomed with. I was not getting

any information, and I was losing precious time I could be spending with family or dedicating to growing my business. Still, a promise was a promise, and I owed it to Jamila to do everything within my power to find Ghazi.

I started at the feel of my wife's hand on my shoulder.

She gave me an apologetic smile.

"Any luck?"

"No." I shook my head in emphasis. "It's like trying to find a needle in a haystack." I paused for a second then added. "Except in this instance, we don't even know if the needle is in the stack."

She squeezed my shoulder in silent sympathy.

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Mohanad. You have a lot going on, and you can only do so much."

I wished it was that easy, but I felt like I was failing my grandmother.

As she kissed me goodnight and went to bed, I stared at the mess of notes before me. Accounting that needed to be done, doctor's bills, endless permits and applications. The idea of adding a baby to the mix was unthinkable.

No matter how hard I tried, I was either letting down my family in Palestine or neglecting the life I was building in America. I was playing a game I couldn't win.

The next morning, I woke up with a migraine and went for an early jog around the neighborhood to start the day right and clear my mind a little. On the way back I bumped into my neighbor, Wesley, walking his dogs. Wesley was pale-skinned, with straight, blond hair that flopped over his azure blue eyes. He always squinted, as though he was looking directly into the sun, and he was at least ten years older than me. He was also a devoted Christian. His two dogs, an Alaskan Husky and a Yorkshire Terrier were more beloved to him than his children, who'd already moved out, and he could talk about his dogs for hours, with an enthusiasm that bordered on obsession.

When we weren't talking about his dogs, our conversations invariably turned to Palestine, Jerusalem, and God's chosen people. It doesn't

matter where the conversation started, it would always end there. After all, I was his Palestinian neighbor, or as I always felt from the way he talked: an unpleasant byproduct of the Promised Land.

I considered waving and continuing, as I was too tired and impatient to become embroiled in another one of Wesley's debates. But alas, luck was not on my side. With a friendly smile, Wesley strode directly into my path and exclaimed what a beautiful morning it was. And, just like that, I'd been snagged. In no time, he'd shepherded the conversation to the Biblical land of Israel. I knew that he was genuinely passionate about the topic and that it was a natural extension of his Christian beliefs, but that day my patience was already in tatters.

I was already hypersensitive to the atrocities that had been imposed on my people and the pain was still fresh from my recent trip. Worse, in my constant searching for Ghazi, I had been speaking to people who had been directly affected by the very 'God's chosen ones' Wesley was waxing lyrical about. That day, I had no energy left to placate him as I normally would. That day, I spoke my peace.

"I know you are getting your information from your Bible, and your church meetings, but things in the holy land aren't exactly what you'd like to believe. The picture you've been painted doesn't resemble the truth, and I would know. I lived it. My childhood was ruined because of it, and my adulthood hasn't been unaffected either, even though I'm living here in the U.S., so far from the travesty."

Wesley gaped at me, but I wasn't done.

"Living here makes me wonder seriously whether I was a prisoner or a slave. My family has been torn apart, and this is how your so-called 'chosen ones' have been treating the Palestinians for almost a century!"

Wesley's shock was plain as day. He had known me for over a year as the quiet, polite neighbor who would simply nod along, rather than challenge his viewpoint. Judging by the look on his face at that moment he no doubt thought I was some half-crazed Muslim, about to unleash a jihad on his quiet suburban street.

"Well, um...," he stuttered, then seemed to visibly pull himself together. "I'm sorry, Joe, I guess I've never thought about it from your perspective."

"Perspective is irrelevant when human beings are being persecuted and killed," I snapped. I'd truly had enough. "Palestinian lives are just as precious as Christian or Jewish ones."

Wesley stepped back, the apologetic look on his face slowly being replaced by one of genuine curiosity.

Then he leaned forward.

"You never told me what happened to you, Joe."

"You never asked," I pointed out, but I relented slightly, in the face of his sincerity. "How much time have you got?"

He smiled in response and threw his arms upward.

"For this, all the time in the world."

We took a seat on a nearby bench, and I began to tell him my story, from the beginning.

It was that day that I realized that I had done exactly what my parents had done for me in my early childhood, when they placed me in that bubble, shielding me from the harsh reality around me. Since moving to the U.S., I had put the past behind me. I had opted to be polite, to act American, to fit in, blend in, avoid rocking the boat, and never make anyone feel uncomfortable. At first, and up until that moment, I had been successful. However, as time goes on, it becomes harder to pretend, and everyone has their breaking point. Americans can live in their bubble of peace and privilege and pretend that the rest of the world isn't burning. I could have a child, live in the suburbs, get a couple of dogs, and focus on my golf swing, but not forever. I knew what lay beyond the bubble, and that knowledge slowly ate away at my peace, from the inside out, until the bubble burst. The day that happened, Wesley's bubble burst too, exposing him to the reality around us, exposing both my scars and his bigotry.

Back to School

City of Tulkarm, West Bank, Palestine, 1988

During my school years, I found myself torn by an internal struggle. Young and naïve Mohanad versus furious, bitter intifada Mohanad. As time went on, and I grew older and bigger, so did the anger within me, alongside my appetite for justice.

I'd left Taha Husain elementary school and was now completing my fifth-grade year at Alkhalidiyya middle school. My best friends were Ahmed, Ibrahim, Sami and Majeed. We were the brightest students in our class, with straight-A grades, and a love for reading and learning. We usually walked home from school; my home was the furthest, but my dad's shop was close, so we would pass by to check in and let him know that I was headed home. From there, I would walk half of the way home with my friends, until we reached their apartment building. During the second half of the trip, I walked alone.

That trip may sound normal to those accustomed to living in first-world countries, but the experience was not as common as it might sound. The journey was fraught with danger, and adventure at the same time. One afternoon, as soon as we left my dad's shop, my friends and I headed along our normal path home. The route took us through the old city and out to the suburbs where we lived, but in the middle of downtown, we ran into other groups of school kids usually led by Amjad and the likes of those with lion hearts. They had done what I had always been too afraid to do—harassed the IOF forces by throwing stones at the soldiers that patrolled the market streets. By sheer bad luck, we were caught in the middle of the crossfire and were forced to flee. Knowing our way around the roads and back alleys that made up our neighborhoods, we sprinted off, confident we would lose the enemy with a few strategic turns. As it turned out, that's not what happened.

With school having been let out a mere fifteen minutes earlier, the street was full of students. Close to seventy school kids started running in every direction, making it impossible for the unit to catch all of us. We knew they would never separate—the IOF always acted in close groups,

for protection. Our group sprinted in the direction of a shopping center that led to another crowded market. We had used this escape route before, and it had always worked for us in the past. In the crowded street, we could easily shake off the soldiers.

Unfortunately, before we reached the center, a military jeep appeared in front of us, cutting us off from the entrance. We knew from experience that the Jeeps usually manned six soldiers, which meant that we had the twelve-soldier unit in pursuit, and about half a dozen ahead. Breathless from running, we looked guilty as sin.

"This way!" Ibrahim panted, taking a left turn and ducking into a narrow, abandoned alleyway. There was a door on the opposite end, and we sprinted toward it. A quick orientation and we deduced that the door led to the only post office building in the city, which just so happened to lead to a busy area full of pedestrians and merchants.

We rushed to the door and yanked at the handle, but clearly, the staff had grown tired of kids running through and they had it reinforced with a new lock. There was no budging it, we couldn't even kick it down, though that didn't prevent us from trying. With no way to go back, and the soldiers getting closer with every passing moment, we decided to climb over the wall. Sam clasped his hands together to form a makeshift step up and one by one, we launched off his hands—first Ibrahim, who rocketed up and over like a well-trained acrobat. Next, it was my turn, and I put my foot into Sam's cupped hands, pushed off, and flew toward the top of the wall. I had just managed to grab hold of the top of the wall when a strong hand grabbed my backpack and hauled me back down. I was dumped unceremoniously back onto the alley floor to face over a dozen occupation soldiers in full combat gear: helmets, high boots, and assorted weaponry including rifles, and wooden batons.

Only Ibrahim managed to escape. Sam, Ahmed, and I were caught.

Close to thirteen soldiers were inside that alley while the rest of them stood at the entrance to make sure no one came to help us. We were just young enough not to be arrested, though in years to come that rule would change and children under the age of ten could be detained. Still, it didn't mean we couldn't get beaten.



Palestinian child being arrested

The moment my knees hit the rough tarmac, I knew it was not going to end well for me. I was becoming accustomed to life during the intifada, and the punishments meted out by the IOF. I hadn't thrown any stones, but I still had a target on my back, being young and male. Surrounded by a dozen angry occupation soldiers, my friends and I knew we were in deep trouble. The narrow, abandoned alley with its empty cans and trash-filled floor only amplified the sounds of their boots stomping toward us. As we watched, wide-eyed, more filed in. Eventually, one spoke, in broken Arabic. I couldn't decipher exactly what he said, but it sounded something like: "We caught you in the act. You will pay dearly for this."

We tried to deny any wrongdoing and explain that we were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, but our pleas fell on deaf ears. Without mercy, the soldiers began to hit and kick us. The first punch was so hard that I cried out, but as the blows continued to land, something inside me shut down. I crouched on the floor, covering my head with my arms, while one of the soldiers, probably the one who pulled me down, held on to my shirt so I couldn't escape.

After a few long minutes of beating and yelling at us inside that alley, the soldier who had me pinned began to drag me out of the alley. I suspected he wanted to put us in the Jeep, and the thought terrified me.

I knew other kids who had been thrown into their military vehicles and had never come back. Fresh fear coursed through my body, and I started to scream. Sam and Ahmed did the same.

In the main street, old men and women had begun to gather around the Jeep, drawn by our cries. Their shouts grew louder, insisting that we were just little kids and demanding that they let us go. As the crowd grew bigger, the soldiers' rage and confidence began to wane. It was one thing to take on a group of fifth graders, another thing entirely to face down an angry mob—even if most of them were well past seventy.

With curses of disgust, our tormentors cuffed our heads, piled into their trucks, and drove away. As the adrenaline rush subsided, the real pain began. I had bruises all over my body, combined with the worst back pain of my life, the result of a brutal blow to my lower back with the butt of a rifle.

After the Israeli soldiers had left, we managed to catch our breaths. The onlookers—our saviors—sat us down in the shade along the sidewalk and offered us water from a reused two-liter plastic soda bottle. Not long after, Amjad showed up with a bunch of school kids who usually led the demonstrations and threw stones. They had wanted to see who was involved in this incident and whether everyone had emerged unscathed. Suffice it to say, they were surprised to find that it was the geeks who had caused all this trouble. As Amjad's eyes glowed with newfound respect, I sat up a little straighter. I was no longer just the quiet geek he would cheat exam answers from.

Amjad shook my friends' hands, one by one until he reached me. With one hand clasped firmly around mine, he placed his free hand on my bony shoulder and tapped it fondly.

"You need to be more careful from now on, it's one thing to take part in a demonstration, but it's a whole other thing to survive it. Well done, Mohanad, well done." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a mask, tailored by hand, in the colors of the Palestinian flag. He slipped it over his head, then he turned around and disappeared in the crowd along with his friends, who surrounded him like a pride of lions.

It was only while I was walking home that I realized I was limping a little. A quick self-assessment showed my leg was hurting, my shirt was ripped at the elbow, and dried blood covered most of the sleeve.

But none of it mattered. The pain was a small price to pay for Amjad's reaction. From that moment on, I was welcomed to his inner circle, the club of strong boys.

The Bakery

Las Vegas, Nevada, 2012

Mutasim and I had acquired a bakery business that was going downhill rapidly and losing thousands each month. The company held accounts with hotels and churches that relied on it for their daily breakfast doughnut and pastry supplies. The previous owners of the bakery had been losing customers to national vendors like Krispy Kreme, and sadly their mediocre baked goods hadn't helped.

Once we took over, I remodeled the front area of the bakery with my own hands, giving it a clean, modern look. I also painted a mural of a French market on one wall to give the space added warmth and coziness. As to the kitchen, we reinvested all the money we generated in the first year into updating and replacing almost every piece of equipment, from mixers to fryers, to conveyor belts. All the vintage appliances had to go, replaced by new, state-of-the-art equipment. At the same time, Mutasim's expertise in baking made a world of difference, and the bakery's product quality and presentation improved dramatically.

In less than two years, we managed to quadruple the number of accounts serviced, and the new front area drew in double the daily morning traffic. Our doughnuts and pastries were complimented constantly by our hotel and church clients, who started referring us to more and more of their peers.

I worked back-to-back shifts and filled multiple positions while we were growing the business. I would help make dough, serve the breakfast bar, sell doughnuts, and man the cash register. I was the proverbial jack of all trades. If the delivery driver called in sick, I would put on that hat and take to the streets to deliver packages. A round trip of five hours, from one a.m. to six a.m., I would drive around town in that little white van.

I didn't mind the work, though it was hard. I was building something for myself, for my new family, and taking care of this new entity felt almost like raising a baby. It was what I had been missing while

working in Palestine, where any investment in the future was pointless, and industry a ticking time bomb. In Sin City, the American Dream was alive and well. If you worked hard, you were rewarded. It was as simple, and exhausting, as that.

Evenings weren't usually that busy in the front area, so I would often wander through to the back and help in the kitchen. Business was booming, and our order list was long and complicated, so the bakers were always grateful for the help. One evening, while I was multitasking, I heard the chime of the front door. I rushed through to the front to serve the incoming customer but skidded to a halt at the counter. Several men huddled in the front area, all dressed in oversized white T-shirts, every exposed inch of skin covered in tattoos. They looked dangerous and intimidating. A short, stocky thug was standing directly in front of the cash register.

"Open it," he snapped, his tone leaving no room for argument. This was a man who was used to being obeyed.

I knew exactly what I had to do in such a situation: to open the register and let them clean it out. It was the only way they would leave peacefully. But my troubled mind didn't function this way. I was not a regular man, the kind who recognized that it made no sense to fight over a few hundred dollars if it might cost you your life. As someone who bore the weight of my past, from which so much had been taken, even the smallest injustice felt like an unbearable loss.

The blood boiled in my veins. This bakery meant everything to me, it was my investment, my future, a gift for my family. I had nurtured it and taken it from a failing operation to a successful business. All the hard work and sweat I had put into it would not be in vain.

"Over my dead body," I growled. I stood with my hands gripping the counter, white-knuckled and half-mad.

The stocky thug laughed, unperturbed.

"Don't be a hero," he warned. "Just give me the money and let us leave so we all can have a nice night." He was completely relaxed as if this was just any other Tuesday night. He didn't even bat an eye as one of the other men drifted to the side, pulled a baseball bat from his side, and swung it at my head with everything he had. I watched the bat swing as

though watching it in slow motion, so bewildered I didn't even think to duck. The bat caught me across the head and felled me like a tree. My knees hit the floor first, and then I crumpled to the floor, hovering in and out of consciousness. Blood ran warm down the side of my face as I listened to the rattle of the register being opened, the sound of our success now synonymous with failure. The business end of a boot dug painfully into my side as one of the assailants kicked out at me, brutally.

It all happened in a matter of seconds. By the time the bakers in the back realized something was wrong, the thieves had fled into the night, their pride piqued, their pockets weighed down with the fruits of my labor.

I couldn't be sure how much time passed while I lay curled in the fetal position, clutching my head. The kitchen staff tried to reassure me, to let me know they had called for an ambulance, but I heard none of it. I wasn't there. My mind had transported me back to that moment twenty years earlier, in the alley back in Tulkarm. Through my pain and confusion, deep rage simmered. Somehow, I felt angrier at those soldiers from long ago, than the criminals who'd just robbed me. A criminal was just a man in need of money, but those soldiers had stolen something far more precious.

Assessing the damage, Mutasim refused to wait for the ambulance and took me to the emergency room himself. Slumped in the passenger seat, I lowered the visor mirror with great effort to look at the wound on my head. My eyebrow and the surrounding skin had formed a flap over my eye, exposing the bone arch. I looked like a monster.

Mutasim spoke soothing words for a few minutes and then lapsed into silence, sensing that nothing he said would penetrate my addled mind. I was grateful for his solid presence at my side, though he wouldn't have guessed.

In the end, it took twenty-seven stitches to sew up my forehead and another thirty-odd stitches at the back of my head. I also had a broken shoulder plate, and severe bruising over most of my body.

When the plastic surgeon walked in before surgery, he stood over me with an angelic smile on his face. I asked if he could put my face back together the way it was before. His answer was an emphatic yes, though he

admitted there would always be a faint, thin line. I surrendered to sedation and exhaustion while he explained what he was about to do. Once or twice, I opened my eyes to see him hovering above me, fixated on his work. I don't recall the details, but I won't ever forget the smile that never left his face.

It was a week before I could walk again. Ten days later, my arm still in a sling, I was back at work.

Those ten days had been difficult. At home, mostly immobile, I'd had time to contemplate how close I had come to death, and how easily I had invited violence back into my life. Had I traveled thousands of miles—moved continents away from conflict—just to die in a violent crime on the other side of the world? No matter how far I tried to run from my past, it lived within me. I had been lucky until then, but the odds were that one day I would dance with the dark and fail to escape.

Psychic Abilities

"We're all worried about you," Sama said. My sister was serving as spokesperson for the rest of the family. "You haven't returned any of our calls for more than a week now. Is everything OK?"

I felt a stab of guilt. My mother called me at least once or twice a week, but I hadn't answered since the incident. I didn't text back either, which I should have known would cause her to panic. It wasn't that I wanted to avoid them, I just wasn't in the right frame of mind to talk to any of my family members. It had taken a huge amount of willpower to finally answer that call from my sister. I had been prepared to lie and tell her I had simply been busy with work, but after exchanging greetings, Sama dove right into it. My sister had the sense of a bloodhound when it came to scenting a lie.

"I've been busy," I muttered, sounding not nearly as convincing as I'd intended. "With stuff. Business stuff."

"Well, this 'stuff' had better be important. You need to talk to Mom and calm her down, she's been freaking out for days."

"She always worries too much for no reason."

"Last week she called me crying," Sama said. "She said she'd had a bad dream, and something terrible had happened to you."

This made me sit up a little straighter and face my image in the mirror hung on the wall across the room, with my pale face, black eye, stitch marks all over my forehead and my broken shoulder. With my arm in a sling, and my face still too sore to smile, I wondered what my mother had seen.

"What did she dream?" I asked, trusting that my mother would have relayed the exact events to my sister. My hunch was correct.

In the dream, my mother had been crying out to me, Sama explained, but I had refused to turn and show her my face. As she tried harder to reach me, I withdrew into the corner of the room, curling into a fetal position. From that point, the image my sister painted grew even

more disturbing, Sama added, "mom described that you started plucking your left eyebrow with your fingers while crying". At this point in the story I couldn't hold myself. All the bad feelings and the depression I was feeling, which I pushed inside me as I usually do, blew up, so I hit the mute button and started crying. My mom felt me from all that distance, she knew I was in trouble, she knew I was in pain, she even identified where I'd been hurt the most. As tears began to roll down my face, and my breathing grew ragged my sister was still talking on the phone.

Eventually, she finished talking, and a heavy silence hung between us. Quickly, I blew my nose to clear my tone of voice then unmuted the call, promised I would make more of an effort to stay in touch, and then lied and said I had a customer waiting so I could hang up.

When we called my mother a few days later, I swore my wife to secrecy and continued to pretend that everything was fine. It was just another scar, one more uncomfortable truth that was better off buried. We'd all suffered enough, and the one solace in my mother's life was that here in the U.S., I was safe. I would not be targeted by an angry soldier, caught in the crossfire, or detained at a border. I refused to rob her of that peace.

After this tough lesson, I made two decisions. The first was acknowledging that I needed to free myself from the grueling hours spent running the bakery and rethink how I wanted to spend the remaining years of my life. The second was that the heavy load I had buried within, this scar I thought I was able to contain, was alive and well within me. It didn't go away, nor did it stop affecting my life and decisions, even as I changed my home, my clothes, my financial status, and my freedom. I would need to figure out a way to heal or this pain would haunt me all the days of my life.

As soon as I was physically capable, I called a meeting with my partner, Mutasim, and we agreed to sell the business. We had it listed, and in less than two months we received a profitable offer that we accepted. With cash on hand and tons of experience, I was ready for my next endeavor. Amid the excitement about the sale, and the determination to find the perfect next business venture, I forgot all about the second resolution I had vowed to address.

And the vow I had made to my grandmother, Jamila.

Despite giving my sister my word, I became so busy that I didn't always pick up when my mom called.

I heard my cell phone ringing, reached for it, glanced at the screen, and then slipped it back into my pocket. In my defense, I was in the middle of an important meeting and, lately, my mother's calls had been centered around village gossip.

But the phone rang a second time, and then a third, and by the time I'd tried to switch it to silent, the person I was meeting with had arched his brow in question.

"You sure you don't want to get that? It seems important."

"Give me a minute," I sighed, headed for the door. I always felt more comfortable speaking Arabic in private.

My mother answered on the first ring. "Sorry Mom," I began. "I was just busy with someone, is everything okay?"

"No, nothing is okay, Habibi!" My mother was sobbing. "I'm sorry to have to tell you this, especially over the phone, but your grandmother passed away a couple of hours ago."

I froze in place, just a few steps away from the restaurant door, in utter shock. In that single second, the restaurant behind me had faded away, and the crowded parking lot before me blurred. The day seemed to dim, and it got dark all around me.

"What are you talking about?" I snapped, grief making me irrational. "She can't just leave us like that!" But she could—of course, she could. She was in her late eighties and had been in poor health. It was only logical that she would leave us.

Through the phone, my mother wept.

My heart constricted. I felt I was being challenged by God himself. I had failed her. I hadn't found Ghazi. Truth be told, I had all but ceased searching. She still didn't get to see him, I thought, woefully. It was all she'd wanted. And she had passed from this world without the peace I had promised her.

My mother, who was already grieving her loss, tried to comfort me, but I barely heard her.

I blamed myself entirely. I was shocked and upset at the same time. Yes, she was old, and it was inevitable that death would come for her eventually, but I had taken her presence for granted. In my mind, she was as enduring as the mountain and would just always be there. She had been there before there was anything called Israel. She had been there when the ships came from the high seas, she had been there to help the refugees who fled persecution in Europe, she had been there when those refugees became too many and started to form towns and communities under the protection of the English army. She had been there when those communities had become more and more aggressive by the day until they had started attacking the locals and driving them away.

She had been there to witness her home being taken away, over and over, and still she was able to rebuild.

After a rich and eventful life, Jamila left us a legacy to be proud of. And I had failed her. I hadn't found Ghazi because I had been too selfish. I had kept myself busy with my own goals and didn't spend enough time searching for him.

My grandmother, who had lived through twelve pregnancies, and borne only four precious children, had lived decades without knowing if her eldest son was dead or alive. And it was too late to change that.

First Day of School

City of Tulkarm, West Bank, Palestine, 1985

Taha Husain had been my elementary school. Situated on the second floor of a building that dates back to the Ottoman Empire and was at least one hundred and fifty years old. This building was turned into a prison at the time of the British mandate, then when the West Bank fell under Jordanian control in 1948, it was turned into an elementary school. The lower level became a middle school, with all the prison cells converted into classrooms and a teacher conference room. The exception was the execution room, which the Brits had used to hang members of the resistance, who were known as ***Fidayee***. That room was locked, and no one was permitted inside.

The older kids used to claim that they had seen the names of people who were waiting for their sentences engraved into the walls of some of the classrooms. Mutasim, who would one day open a bakery with me, was a chubby kid whose family bakery was just down the street from the



My elementary school which was used as a prison during the British mandate

school. He and other kids from that area used to go play soccer in the schoolyard after hours. Once, they managed to open the window of that execution room, just a crack. According to Mutasim, they saw a metal hook dangling from the center of the ceiling from which they would tie the hangman's noose. Whenever Mutasim would relay the story, no matter how much time had passed, his eyes would widen with fear, making the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

When I went to school for the first time, I wasn't quite sure how to make friends, but I was ready to talk to everyone. Most of the children were friendly enough, but as always, some would rather make fun of the new boy in class. Ali was as big as my older brother, Suliman, though he was only in third grade. As I walked into the main school hall, he was leaning with his back to a wall, talking to a group of his friends.

As I passed by, he called me out.

"Come here," he ordered.

I didn't take much note of the name calling, so I walked right up to him.

"Hello."

He glanced at his followers, gave them a little wink as a precursor to the show, and then asked, in a sarcastic tone, "What did your mom make you for lunch?"

"Cheese sandwiches," I answered immediately, pride in my voice. Cheese sandwiches were my favorite, I couldn't imagine a better lunch.

"Show me." I opened my backpack and pulled out the sandwich, which was wrapped in a recycled plastic shopping bag.

Before I could unwrap it, Ali snatched it from my hand.

"I'm a little hungry," he said, opening the bag.

I began to feel violated and tried to grab the bag back, but he held it above my head which I couldn't reach. Laughing, he gave me a shove, which sent me sprawling to the floor.

From my vantage point on the ground, I noticed a pair of old, ripped shoes, covered in black stains. I recognized those shoes. Amjad was the son of a mechanic, his father owned a tire shop. Amjad would help his dad in the shop, which left him with stains all over his hands and clothes, but it



Me in my classroom

also made him strong and feared among his peers. He was a large kid with light skin, blond hair, and wide green eyes. He extended his hand to help me get up. Then he looked at Ali who had already lost his sarcastic smile.

"I was just playing with him. I wasn't going to eat his lunch," Ali sneered, handing back my lunch bag. I opened my mouth to speak, but before I could offer a word of thanks, the school bell rang. It was so loud, that all the kids started to run toward their assembly lines for the morning lineup. Slowly, Amjad and I headed towards our class lineup. From that moment on, Amjad was a hero in my eyes.

While the school would have been a big disappointment to anyone coming from even the roughest of American schools, to me, it meant everything a great school would mean to any aspiring student. Regardless of the poor conditions, and lack of every basic thing a school might require to function, it was where I went to learn and expand my view of the world.

For a while, I thrived there and saw nothing wrong with studying in an old execution center. Life made sense to me... until it didn't.

I was a naïve seven-year-old boy who thought life would be perfect in this little town called Tulkarm. In this school called Taha Hussein.

Sadly, the good life I thought would last forever was soon to collapse.

One day, during the second lesson, which happened to be Arabic reading, a teacher opened the class door without knocking. This was unusual, but even more ominous was the nervous look the teacher wore on his face. He rushed in and started to whisper to our teacher, whose eyes widened in a similar worrisome look. Seconds later, a siren sounded, followed by the short, deep bursts of gunfire some distance away. At night, my parents would brush these sounds off, saying it was a wedding party with fireworks and celebratory rounds in the air. If it was daytime, they would say it was the police catching the bad guys who stole my grandmother's sheep. My parents' excuses always seemed convincing, but this time it was different; my parents weren't around and the adults in the room were frightened. Within minutes the sound of people yelling, and women calling the names of their children seeped through the walls. Then we could hear the shouts of young men, growing louder and louder. The teacher rapped firmly on the table before him to restore order as the kids started to panic. The quiet didn't last long. Nasty fumes began to seep through the door, like rotten eggs, burning onion, and cracked pepper all mixed together. Before I knew what was going on, I'd inhaled and my nose, throat, and eyes began to burn. I choked, I couldn't breathe. Was I dying?

Suddenly, the principal opened the door and spoke quickly to our teacher, instructing him to send us home, as it was no longer safe within the school. Through a haze of smoke and pain, we found ourselves on the street outside the school building. Two hundred children, including those of us from the elementary school upstairs, plus a greater number of older kids from the middle school downstairs. In the streets, children ran about in confusion, dodging cars that zoomed past in all directions. The air was heavy with the sound of sirens, gunshots, car horns, children yelling and crying, parents running around yelling their kid's names, more rounds fired, again and again, and above it all, ambulance sirens, ever-present. I stood transfixed, unable to move, barely able to breathe, as complete chaos descended around me.

I watched as an ambulance zoomed in and out a couple of times, rushing to the only hospital the city had back then. More rounds sound-

ed, this time much closer and much, much louder. The tear gas mixed with the smoke of burning tires, creating a thick cloud that was impossible to escape. Everything was foggy and hazy, and I had trouble seeing even a few feet in front of me. I was in shock, and I had no idea which way was home.

I was dropped off and picked up by my dad or older siblings, so I never had to pay attention to the direction we took to school. For the first time, I was completely alone. My heart raced, thundering in my chest, as I ran in one direction for a short while, then stopped and sprinted in the opposite direction, trying to avoid the danger that seemed to spring up everywhere I turned. I was barely old enough to read, yet I was running through the middle of a war zone.

Then, miraculously, I heard my father's voice, calling my name. Through the haze, I saw a familiar sight: a white 1973 Peugeot with its pointy rear fenders and rounded front headlights. My father was hanging out the driver's door, waving his arm. I ran toward him and leaped into the backseat beside my older brother, Nasri. Suliman was riding shotgun beside my father. They all looked relieved to see me, but quickly masked their fear behind indifference. I wanted desperately to act the same, but tears streamed down my face, tracking lines through the dust and grime.

"Are you crying?" Nasri asked, forcing a laugh.

"No!" I shook my head, vehemently. "It's just the gas, it's making my eyes water."

"Whatever you say, little brother," Nasri teased, and though his voice was strained with tension, I was grateful for this small attempt at normalcy.

My dad tramped on the gas, and we headed home. Along the way, terrified children screamed, as adults ran with them, up and down the streets. Through the tumult, I noticed that some young men were running towards the action, rather than away from it, and they had started burning tires to close the streets and slow the progress of the attacking convoy as it approached the heart of the city.

A few times my dad had to turn around and take a detour. It felt apocalyptic, and I had no idea how much time had passed. Eventually,

we were on our way to the outskirts of the town and the noise, sirens, and smell of tear gas started to dissipate. A few minutes later, we arrived home to find my mother waiting anxiously by the front door.

We sat down to catch our breaths and recover, while Mom poured water over my face to alleviate the burning. As the adults spoke in hushed whispers, a million questions raced in my mind. What had happened? Why on earth would anybody gas a school full of children? Why did everyone seem to understand what was happening, except for me?

"Those soldiers you saw are occupation forces," said my dad. He stopped for a second as if trying to figure out the best way to break it down for a seven-year-old. Then he continued, "They are not like us, they are not Palestinian. They won't hesitate to harm us, even children, so you must be careful."

My parents had tried their best to shield us from the disturbing events that frequently happened around us. They had hoped that this situation would be resolved and that the trauma would end with their generation. Now the war had crept into our lives, piercing the bubble my parents had carefully maintained. More shocking to me than the violence, was the fact my life up to that point had been a lie. For the entirety of my albeit short life, I had been sleeping next to a giant, fire-breathing monster, oblivious to the truth.

That night, with a heavy sigh, my father shared his story.

"Back when I was a kid, probably around your age, catastrophe struck. It was 1967 but we would come to call it the year of Naksa. Your mother and I had not met yet, and my family lived in the town of Kufr Ra'I, a small town in the West Bank, not too far from Tulkarm. The town's entire population was under five thousand, and we lived a simple life, farming crops and livestock. However, your grandfather was among the few merchants who owned shops and engaged in different kinds of trade." My dad stopped speaking for a second, caught up in his memories, so I prodded his arm to remind him to continue. "We were attacked," he said eventually, "And forced to flee our town as the war broke out and the Israeli army took over the West Bank."

"So, you had to leave your home?" I asked. "You, and grandpa and grandma, and all my uncles and aunties... you just had to leave?"

He caught sight of my stricken face and continued, as gently as he dared, "That wasn't the worst of it, son. They also invaded Sinai in Egypt, the Golan heights in Syria, large parts of Gaza, and the holy city of Jerusalem."

In his way, he was trying to explain the magnitude of the Naksa, but I was only a boy and couldn't see beyond my limited world.

"Why didn't you stay? You shouldn't have let them send you away."

My father smiled at my innocence. "That was not an option, Mohanad. Those who stayed didn't survive."

"What happened to them?"

"Horrific things," he said, and tapped my knee twice, as though trying to distract himself.

"When they ordered us to leave, there was no time to take anything with us. We became instantly penniless—refugees, like the people in the camp you can see from your window.

My eyes widened in shock as the implication of his words sank in.

"So those Israelis who fired those rounds today have been doing this since you were a kid?"

Endless. This war was endless.

My father nodded.

"Just as you were able to run away from trouble today, we were able to flee within the West Bank. That's how we ended up in Tulkarm."

It was a somber evening. My father described how he witnessed it all—his parents losing everything, how they'd had to start again, from nothing.

"We went from being landowners, and businessmen, to impoverished homeless people. My father and his brothers had to work incredibly hard to revive their father's business after the occupation of the West Bank..." He trailed off, and it was obvious that he was trying to decide whether to share something else.

I held my breath, determined not to jinx it, and soon enough, he resumed.

"When we were first ejected from our town, we became so poor that when my shoes fell apart. I went barefoot for more than a year before my dad was able to buy me a new pair."

My blood turned to ice. The image of my father as a boy with no shoes cut me right through to the core, and I had to swallow down the lump that had formed in my throat.

My whole life I had grown up listening to stories of monsters and heroes. At the end of every tale, if the hero was courageous and good, justice always prevailed, and the monster was punished. But as I pictured my father as a boy, with no shoes to cover his chilled feet, it seemed my understanding of the world had begun to fracture. Where was the superhero, who would swoop in and save my father and his family, to restore their homes and punish the bad guys? I realized that superheroes didn't exist, there were only brave men willing to do anything to provide for their families. My father had survived and built a good life for us, despite his horrific childhood. My father, it seemed, was the true hero. Only now he wore a look of fear and hopelessness, and for all his courage, there was no justice to be had.

A Call Like No Other

Las Vegas, Nevada, 2013

A year and a half after my grandmother passed away, I received an astonishing phone call from my mother.

"We may have located your uncle," she said, without preamble.

"What?" Her words rocked me to my core. A flood of excitement, followed by a wave of shame.

"He's alive," my mother continued, impervious to my emotional upheaval. "But he's not in the best shape... If it's him at all."

"What do you mean if it's him? You mean you're not sure?"

"A high-ranking official at the Palestinian embassy in Sweden contacted me to say they have located an elderly Middle Eastern man, whose description matches your uncle's. I think you should give this man a call."

That night I couldn't sleep. There was so much at stake. I knew that if this person wasn't Ghazi, my mom would be devastated. In that brief conversation, it had been abundantly clear that she already had her hopes up, and I couldn't blame her. She hadn't seen her brother since he'd been chased out of Palestine when she was just twelve years old. If I couldn't sleep wrestling over the possibility of meeting an uncle I had never met or spoken to, I could only imagine what was going on in her mind at that moment. This man had not decided to roam the world willingly or travel the seven seas to pursue his dreams. This was a man—one of many—who had been driven out, in fear for their lives and the retribution that might be taken against their families. They had been chased across countries until they were murdered or simply disappeared. The logical conclusion to explain Ghazi's absence was that he had been assassinated years ago. Deep down, that's what I had believed, but now there was a chance that he could be alive. Alive, and in hiding after all these years.

A part of me dreaded making the call, but I knew I needed to find answers for my mother as quickly as possible.

First thing the following morning, I dialed Imad Karraj, the consular in Stockholm.

I explained who I was and that I had a missing uncle who matched the description of one of Mr. Karraj's wards.

Mr. Karraj was curt and to the point.

"We do have an old man on record with the correct surname, but not the same first name. I believe he is of Arabic origin." There was an awkward pause. "He may be suffering from chronic social illness because he keeps to his apartment day and night, with curtains drawn and shutters closed. People are unwelcome. Does this sound anything like your uncle?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "I don't know him well enough to confirm anything, but I'd like to come over as soon as possible to make sure."

"That would probably be the best course of action at this stage," Karraj agreed.

"I'll call you back with my flight details as soon as I have them," I promised.

As I prepared for the trip, I knew there was a strong possibility that this person was not my uncle. While his surname was not common, it was still shared by thousands of people. I was probably about to spend thousands of dollars on a fool's errand, raising my mother's hopes only to dash them once more.

Then there was the alternate possibility: that it was him, but that he wanted nothing to do with his family or the outside world. After all, he had never tried to get into contact with any of his family. We knew absolutely nothing about him after all these years. I didn't know if he had been through trauma or, even worse, if he had been hurt by the Israeli intelligence agents or death squads. The one clear thing was that this man had been under tremendous pressure or shock, so I prepared for the worst. And the worst possible scenario would be that I found that this man was indeed my uncle, but that he had no desire to see or hear from his family.

Even facing likely disappointment, something within me longed for answers. So much of the truth had been kept from me—all in the name

of protecting me—or buried to focus on a new, happier life in the here and now. But the pain was always present, even when it was hidden. This would be an opportunity to face it head-on, to pull some of what had been lost back into the light.

My grandmother would never learn what had happened to her son. However, her request had been driven by more than just her loss and curiosity. Perhaps she had known that, in some way, finding my uncle would be cathartic for all of us. A way to heal. At the very least, something that had been taken from us might finally be restored.

I would not let her down.

Intifada Tensions

City of Tulkarm, West Bank, Palestine 1988

The barley had been harvested in the field behind our house, and my two older brothers and I were playing soccer on the flattened surface. We'd gathered with our neighbors, Fuad and Baher, who were both older than me. Baher had just finished high school and was about to leave for the U.S. to attend University. The older boys were often annoyed by me trying to join them since, in their eyes, I was 'still a baby', but I didn't care. I had no desire to join my younger siblings—toy cars and dolls held no interest for me. Besides, the older kids knew things—secrets that I could learn.

In the distance, we watched a patrolling armored vehicle enter the Tulkarm refugee camp's main road. We could hear the thunk of rocks hitting its thick metal plating, and soon it was in pursuit of the youths, soldiers firing off rounds and hurling canisters of tear gas from their higher vantage point. Most of the refugees scattered but, to our horror, a few ran toward the field where we were playing. Out in the open, they were an easier target for the vehicle to follow, and as luck would have it, we were standing directly in their path. We sprinted for home. The house my dad had built between the olive orchards was secluded, at least a quarter mile away from the nearest home. This idyllic peace was once the envy of our friends, but when the Intifada started, living in a house far from the city became a curse. Escalations started at night between the trees in the orchards, and some nights the soldiers would clash with the resistant youth in and around our property. My nights were filled with the sounds of yelling, shooting, and soldier's boots stomping past the windows. On occasion, rounds would slam into the thick outer walls. On bad days, when the fighting would escalate, I would spend most of the night under my bed, terrified of passing before a window. When the sounds of war eventually died down, I'd climb back into bed, hoping my brothers hadn't noticed my cowardice.

That day, as our precious soccer ball lay abandoned in the field, the back and forth between occupation soldiers and the youth kept going

through the afternoon, and it only intensified as darkness fell. I lay in my usual spot, on the floor under my bed, wishing I wasn't such a baby. I was fast asleep against the cold floorboards when the sound of banging at the door woke me. The first rays of sunlight were peeking through the window, and I knew my family would still be asleep.

I found them gathered in the living room facing the door as it shook on its hinges from the force of the pounding. Mom gathered us with her as Dad went to slide the bolt open with shaking hands.

A unit of military infantry stormed inside. There must have been over a dozen of them. To a boy like me, they seemed so tall, giants, as they towered over my father. They were angry, machine guns hoisted, fingers on the triggers. I despised their army green outfits. The sound of their communication unit was still ringing in my ears, shouting back and forth in Hebrew, a foreign language that I didn't understand. It sounded harsh and alien to my ears. They split up, half lining us up by the wall in the living room and frisking us while the rest searched the house. My younger siblings were crying loudly but I kept quiet, following the lead of my older brothers. They opened closets and drawers and threw everything within on the floor, they kicked doors open, breaking locks. To my surprise, my father spoke to them in Hebrew, asking what it was they were searching for. They told him that they were looking for a few guys who'd thrown stones at them earlier. These rebels had run toward our house. My dad assured the soldiers that there was no one else in the building but the family members. After stripping the house and finding nothing, they lounged on the furniture and ordered my parents to make them breakfast. My parents got to work immediately, while one of the soldiers stood in the doorway with his gun pointed at them. Me and my younger siblings hovered in the kitchen, but my two older brothers were forced to keep standing against the wall in the living room. As much as I wanted to emulate the older boys, I was relieved that I was permitted to stay close to my mother.

Once breakfast was ready, they made my father taste every plate to ensure it wasn't poisoned, before they began to eat. Later, they locked us in one room and spent a couple of hours on the rooftop of the house, observing the surroundings. After what seemed like an eternity, they left.

"I'm not sending you guys to school today," she announced that morning. My two older brothers objected to her suggestion immediately and began arguing that not sending us to school wouldn't prevent bad things from happening. After a ten-minute argument, our parents caved. The truth was we weren't that much safer at home, anyway.

As my father simmered with frustration and humiliation, I continued to master my ability to bottle up my emotions. Up until that time, I had been the spoiled young son, prone to emotional outbursts. Now, I withdrew, and I was not the only one. My father became more serious and more nervous, and he started to show less affection toward us. He withdrew, spending more time in silent isolation, and began to act in ways we had never seen before. If he heard noises coming from outside, day or night, he would walk right up to the window to try to identify the source. At the time his moodiness confused me, but now that I have a family of my own, I can relate to those feelings of vulnerability and helplessness. How would it feel to be responsible for protecting your family, while aware that should a threat arise, there was very little you could do? If anything, having a man in the house probably made us a greater target in the eyes of the enemy—a greater threat.

As my father withdrew, my mother became even more protective. Play dates and adventures became a thing of the past. Even visiting Grandma Jamila, my favorite person in the world, was a rare treat.

As the demonstrations, chases, shootings, beatings, and terror continued, we started to witness fellow students being arrested, shot, and injured. It didn't even feel out of the norm anymore, it was just our lives. We didn't have any reference points for a better life; other than the stories our elders would tell us about how life was good for them when they lived by the Mediterranean Sea, before the occupation. Back when they lived in cities like Yaffa, Akko, and other cities that had become major Israeli cities. Our people were not permitted to visit those areas without applying for a permission card. The same cities that our elderly weren't allowed to return to, though they still carried the keys to their homes and shops around their necks, as a reminder of the rights that had been taken from them. So many would die believing that one day their families would return to claim what had once been theirs.

For us, the new generation, these were empty dreams. Tough as it was, there was little to gain from the past; instead, we had to fight to preserve the little we had left. Resisting the occupation was the only option. As young kids, we knew nothing about the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and its influence on the political and social fabric of America, we knew nothing about the Zionist lobby in Washington. We knew nothing about the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC)—a group that lobbies pro-Israel policies—that it was a major donor and influencer in electing politicians and congress members, sometimes influencing even the president of the United States. We didn't know that the U.S., a country that was seven thousand miles away from Palestine, was supporting those who took our land with almost four billion dollars annually. We didn't know that every taxpayer in the strongest economy in the world, wittingly or unwittingly, was contributing to the funding of the IOF whose mission was to annihilate an uprising of people who had decided to stand in the face of oppression and apartheid. We knew none of that. We only knew that there was a colonial displacement settler invader and that our job was to resist. This resistance came with a high price, and the worst was yet to come.

Goodbyes and Farewells

My father would rush us all to school in his banged-up old car. With multiple stops, the journey took ages, and by the time we reached my school. The first bell had long been rung, so there was no one in the schoolyard. There was something spooky about running into school without meeting a single soul until I reached my classroom.

One morning, as I entered the school, I noticed the loud rumbles of voices coming from the classrooms. Worried, I sped toward my classroom, desperate to find out what was going on. The closer I got to my class, the louder the voices became.

The room hosted close to fifty kids, and each pair of students would share a desk. I sat in the second row, with a seat close to the window, overlooking the playground and the asphalt-paved mini soccer field.

The moment I stepped into the classroom, I noticed an unusual scene in the back. Two desks behind mine, the seat was unoccupied, and filled with bunches of flowers, roses, and palm leaves.

It was Amjad's seat.

Mr. Abu Sham'a, the English teacher, was at his table at the front of the classroom, trying to calm everyone down. All the students were whistling loudly and some of them were yelling. Amjad's name punctuated the ruckus.

I sat in my seat and quickly turned to my desk-mate.

"Where is Amjad?"

In my worst imaginings, I pictured my brave friend with his arm in a sling, propped up in a hospital bed in town with his mother fussing around him. He made a hobby of antagonizing the Israelis, and my heart quickened as I thought of what they might have done to him, assuming they'd finally caught him. I could only hope he was injured and not detained which could have far more dangerous consequences.

My worst imaginings were child's play.

"He was chased by the Israeli soldiers last night." My friend spoke in a shocked whisper. "He was shot in the back. He lasted a few hours in the hospital, but... he didn't make it, Mohanad."

My jaw dropped, and my eyes widened. Amjad had been an antagonist to the Israelis, but he was only a boy, barely a year older than me.

As I sat there, trying to absorb the reality of a world where Amjad no longer existed, a cold truth began to emerge. One I had been trying to ignore for some time. At this point in the Intifada, anything was possible, and no one was safe—women and children included. We were already attending funerals and performing farewell prayers twice a week. Adults would carry the coffins to the graveyard on their backs, walking from the mosque, where the final prayer and sermon were performed. The citizens would hold a demonstration every time we took another victim of this war to the graveyard where they could finally rest in peace.

Over the coming months and years, we would say goodbye to many of our fellow Palestinians. Some I would know intimately, some I had only heard of, and many were strangers, but we would always participate in the final tribute, to make sure the departed were remembered. These



Farewell demonstration for a Palestinian murdered by Israeli fire.

were people who had lost so much but would still give everything they had—not for glory, or riches, but for the love of their families, and the justice they still somehow believed in. For every person killed, dozens more escaped with their lives, but not unscathed. They would go on to live a maimed and traumatized existence, forever changed.

As death became a normality, I still struggled to understand how it had become so. Didn't we live in a modern society, with rules and rights? Amjad, my hero, had been the one I had always gone to for guidance. He had protected me from bullies and kept me safe at school. He was far stronger and more courageous than I was. Without him, I felt vulnerable and exposed. It crushed me that I had lost a good friend, but a deeper, secret thought rose shamefully. It could just have easily been one of my brothers. It could have been me. As my terror grew, so did the danger. Any one of us could be taken at any time.

I was twelve years old and full of anger and confusion. How was it permissible for the occupiers to come into our homes and towns and kill children, without consequence?

I wanted to cry, I wanted to shout... I wanted to kick an IOF soldier in the gut, to punch those responsible for Amjad's death in the face. I wanted to lash out at a world that had let us all down. I realized that this hide-and-seek we were playing with the occupation forces was not a fair game. We had no hope of winning. It was like placing a lamb in a lion's cage.

I was so angry that I couldn't even hear my classmates around me. The world had shrunk to just me, and Amjad's empty chair.

A loud banging at the door snapped me out of my thoughts. Older kids from the other classrooms had run into the big hallway between classrooms. They surrounded our classroom door, yelling and whistling as they caught sight of the empty desk where Amjad used to sit. The young kids were shocked, confused, and frustrated. The older kids were enraged.

Their anger infected us, and we started banging on the desks with our hands, stomping the floor with our feet. Soon enough, the rest of the classes were doing the same. Then, in a synced movement, we all stood up and left the classroom. The demonstration that followed was one of

the most furious I have ever witnessed, made more so by the fact that it was carried out by children. We marched out of the school and roamed the streets through town. With each street we passed, more citizens would join us. More and more people joined, marching and shouting the name of my friend. Funerals of children were always larger because more people would join them even if they didn't know the deceased. No person could silently stand by as children were slaughtered.

In the aftermath of Amjad's death, I was unable to sleep. I had repeated nightmares of how the shooting might have unfolded. A scene kept replaying, over and over in my mind: Amjad throwing stones, then turning around and sprinting for his life. A soldier, in hateful green, taking a knee and taking aim. The delicate squeeze of a trigger, the crack of the shot, and Amjad falling, arms windmilling as he crashed, face first to the ground. My nightmares always ended the same way: with Amjad lying prostrate on the floor, soaked in his own blood.

My friend had been murdered, his childhood taken from him. It would be years before I realized that moment was when my childhood had also been stolen.

A Wise Decision

Las Vegas, Nevada, 2013

Every night after work I would spend hours on my laptop, browsing flight deals to Sweden. I'd worry about the prices increasing, while also feeling strangely frozen and unable to commit.

A pressing voice inside me kept casting doubt over my decision. Was I going to travel to a foreign country to look for a grown man, who might not even be my uncle?

If those doubts weren't bad enough, I had very real commitments to consider at home, like my business, and my long-suffering family. It had been far too long since we'd last enjoyed a vacation together, or enjoyed any real, quality, family time. What right did I have to drop everything and pursue a hair-brained treasure-hunt, if it came at their expense?

There was also a logical argument to be made. My uncle might well be living under that false name because he didn't want to be found. He had never made any effort to contact any member of his family, and perhaps he had good reason. Perhaps our real job was to respect his wishes to be left alone.

I would be spending a lot of money traveling to Sweden, and I would be devastated if it turned out to be a waste. I could think of far better uses for that investment—I could visit my parents, who were getting older every year, and would be thrilled to see me.

While this conflict waged war in my mind, my wife came into the room and noticed the search for flights to Sweden, which was still open on my screen.

"Have you made up your mind?" she asked sleepily. "Are you going to go?"

I knew she would support me no matter what, so I explained my concerns. Once I was done, she smiled.

"Whatever you end up doing, Mohanad, just make sure it's a choice you can live with."

My wife, a deeply private person, couldn't help feeling that my uncle had a right to anonymity if that was what he wanted.

"We don't know what he's been through. How he's changed. If the man in Sweden is even your uncle."

"But what if he needs help? What if I can help him, somehow?"

"He lives in Sweden, a Western country that respects human rights and dignity. He's not being hunted by the IOF any longer. I think you need to be honest, Mohanad. Are you trying to help your uncle, or continue your crusade?"

Her words struck me deeply. It was true that the longer I lived in the West, the more the plight of Palestine festered inside me. The injustice, the ignorance, and most difficult to bear: the hopelessness.

The only thing more frustrating than trying to fight the problem was to sit back in my comfortable suburban home and do nothing.

For some time, we'd discussed the possibility of me talking to a therapist to process some of my childhood experiences, and how they continued to impact me as an adult. Eventually, I would have to face the past, and all the ways it had changed me. Sweden offered a sense of action and purpose, but I also wondered if I was simply running away from facing the harder truth.

As a boy, running had been all I'd had. I'd run through streets and fields from the IOF. As I'd grown older, I'd kept running, all the way to America. But now I was a husband and a father. If I kept running, the distance that I sensed growing between me and my family, my past and my present, would only grow wider.

I closed my laptop, rubbed my weary eyes, and headed to bed.

For several days, I focused on work and buried my head in the sand. I was capable of being hyper-focused and obsessive, especially when I was avoiding something I didn't want to face.

Then, my mother called, and I realized I couldn't avoid the topic any longer.

"Mom, what outcome are you expecting from this trip, if I were to make it?" I asked.

"To find him," she said simply. "To finally find answers."

It was such a simple response, but so honest. It spoke volumes. Deep down, I know she longed to discover what had happened to him, and why he'd chosen to abandon his family. To abandon her. She wanted to know if there was any possibility that he might return home and give my grandmother's spirit a chance to finally find peace. If none of that was possible, then she wanted to be able to move on.

"And if he's dead?" I asked, needing her to face the worst-case scenario. "Or alive, but broken?"

"Then it won't be our first loss or our last," she said quietly. "We are survivors. We accept it and move on." She paused. "But Habibi, I know he needs our help. I can feel it."

I felt her pain, but I still had reservations. She was pinning her hope on a man she hadn't spoken to in decades. A man who could have picked up the phone and called her at any point but had chosen not to.

"If it's too hard, I will understand," she added. "You don't have to go, you don't have to do it."

Nothing was too hard when it came to helping my mother. I would walk to the end of the world to bring her solace. I'd made my decision, but as I contemplated going to Sweden, it felt as though the trip would only raise more questions, rather than offer any answers.

Crossing the Line

The City of Kfar Saba, Israeli Area, 1994

After Amjad's death, everything changed. My entire life's purpose became survival. I was overwhelmed by a crippling fear that I would be killed and forgotten by the world.

Years passed and I played a perpetual game of hide-and-seek, always hiding. I was a patriot, but I played it safe, avoiding conflict. I wouldn't join demonstrations, either, though they still called upon me. As a child, Amjad had been my hero. As I became a teenager, a new role model emerged. Our neighbor, Baher, had finished high school and gone to study in the U.S. I followed his progress with interest, and it began to make sense to follow in his footsteps. I couldn't stop the aggressors, and I couldn't protect myself and my family, but perhaps I could find another way out of this violent cycle.

Every summer when Baher came back and hung out with my older brothers, I would listen to his stories about living and studying in the U.S., hanging on to every word. I became obsessed with the idea, daydreaming about doing the same, to the point that I started to teach myself the language, even memorizing songs in English.

At the time, it was no more than a pipe dream. My family had no money to send me abroad, and no political connections to secure me a visa. I was not the academic genius that would be recognized by a kind patron and whisked away to a brighter future. I might as well have been planning to fly to the moon. However, it was the one hope I clung to. Something possible, even if it was highly improbable. Once I graduated high school I enrolled as a freshman in a local college in the nearby town of Nablus. During that time, I began taking on odd jobs to make some extra money, both for me, as well as to help my family. I utilized all my skills and hobbies, making calligraphy, carving on the holy olive tree trunks and branches, and making souvenirs, key-chains, and frames. I supplied my creations to local gift and souvenir stores that served tourists in historic cities like Jerusalem and Bethlehem. I custom-made family trees on a frame to hang on the wall with a painting of the tree and

calligraphy of the names. I also started taking simple remodeling and construction jobs, general painting work, or mural painting, which paid a bit more. Still, it was hard to make real money in the West Bank, where most people struggled to put food on the table.

Khaldun was a cousin my age, and we got along just fine. His family owned a textile company in the city with multiple retail locations, and they were looking for employees—people to do sales, distribution, run machinery, etc. Eventually, I started working with them as well.

What I liked most, and maybe later hated most, about this family business is that they worked together—all six brothers under the leadership of their father, who was a well-versed merchant. He was the first role model in business that I had to look up to and learn from. He and his sons ate together, worked together, and lived together, all except for Khaldun, who decided to go and work on the Israeli side of the border. It wasn't that he needed the money or the job, but because he felt the need for independence from the family and the rules of his father.

Khaldun went on to become an important figure in his place of work. He mastered Hebrew, and all the job requirements, and ended up making a lot more money than I ever could in the West Bank. His success encouraged me to look for work in the Israeli cities. I took jobs at Arab homes, painting, and remodeling during summer breaks. The money was better, even with the inconvenience and discomfort of illegally crossing the borders of the West Bank into the Israeli areas.

My cousin Khaldun called me and asked me if I could come to work with him one weekend to cover for a no-show. I agreed as I owed him a favor, plus, I knew I could expect good pay for the short gig.

Khaldun had been working in the cafeteria of an Israeli college campus in the city of Kfar Saba, which was close to my hometown. He would often stop by on his way home from work since our town, Tulkarm, was on the border.

My cousin explained that the patron he worked for was always looking for employees, as he often hosted catering events. We discussed pay over the phone, and it seemed pretty good, considering it was a quick weekend job. I would be working for Jewish Israelis and serving their students, the same people who fought in the IOF and who were, in

many ways, my sworn enemies. Our boss wouldn't pay us as much as he would pay a Jewish person to do the same job, but the cost of maintaining my pride was too high. Palestinians working a skilled or professional job in Palestine could expect to generate less than a quarter of what an Israeli would make doing the same job. My wage in the West Bank was around five Israeli shekels per hour, which was equivalent to one and a half U.S. dollars. To put it into perspective, my hourly rate working for my boss, Dani, was fifteen shekels or four dollars.

Still, I had a dream to fulfill, and if I had to crawl on my hands and knees through Israel to do it, I would.

I took the job.

A week later, I was on my way to the border to meet my Jewish boss.

American?

I TOOK A TAXI to the border checkpoint and followed the instructions my cousin had given me. The gates through the apartheid wall included a one-way turnstile, to ensure only one person could pass through at a time, metal detectors, and thick military-grade mesh wire fencing which caged everyone inside. Overhead, soldiers patrolled their lanes with a bird's eye view of every person who crossed through those gates.

As a Palestinian youth, it was nearly impossible for me to get a permit to enter the Israeli side, for work nor pleasure.

Khaldun had instructed me not to walk through those gates, but to walk along the side wall, keeping to the left. A few hundred yards in, the wall veered to the side where the concrete and mesh walls intercepted. The area was overrun with weeds, and grass as high as my shoulders. I was to look for an opening in the mesh fence and climb through it. I hunted around and, after a moment of panic, found what I was looking for. An opening, cut low in the thick fence with what must have been very heavy-duty bolt cutters. The opening was triangular, and close to the ground, which is why it had taken me a minute to spot it. The weeds around it had been leveled by foot traffic, and it made me wonder just how many people had used this illegal access point before me. I didn't dwell long. Dropping to my knees, I crawled through, beneath the fence, and emerged on the Israeli side. The moment I appeared, a small, white Ford pulled up beside me. Khaldun grinned at me from the passenger seat.

A weird feeling consumed me as we drove around the main gate to enter what had once been our own country; to go to a city that my grandparents had been kicked out of fifty years prior; to work for a man who saw me as "Palestinian"—subhuman. To him, I was nothing but cheap labor, to be discarded once I'd served my purpose. I resented that feeling of inferiority, so, when he asked my name, I hid my Arabic name and told him that my name was Joe. I told him that I was an American. It was a truly odd thing to do, but I couldn't bring myself to give him my true name, and since I had been practicing English with our neighbors who spoke it perfectly, I felt I could pull it off. Khaldun swiveled around

in his chair and looked back at me with wide eyes, but he didn't contradict me. Emboldened, my story became even more convoluted.

During the twenty-minute car ride, Dani chatted with me in English. His English wasn't the greatest, but he was proficient enough to get his point across. I told him that my father was an Arab and that he had worked in the United Nations up until his retirement. He married an American citizen, and that I was their son. I boasted that I spoke Arabic and English and that I was learning Hebrew, too. I'd made myself a liar, but even so, I relished the fact my English was superior to everyone else in that car. To this day, the memory brings me deep shame.

It was a good twenty minutes to get to the college. When I wasn't lying to Dani, I was gazing out of the window. Israel was a beautiful, modern country. Wide highways, clean cities, tall buildings, traffic lights...it was all new to me, though I made sure to hide my awe behind a disinterested expression.

When we arrived at the gate, Dani flashed an ID card at the security guards, who lifted the boom with the push of a button.

We drove through the narrower streets within the college. With its stylish buildings, manicured lawn, and perfect landscaping, it looked nothing like the college I was attending in Nablus. There, greenery was an unthinkable luxury, as the community struggled with constant water shortages. However, it seemed different rules applied here, and fortune fell from the skies in abundance.

As Dani left and my cousin showed me around, he shook his head in disappointment. "American, huh? What, are you ashamed to be Palestinian?"

I didn't know what to tell him. The words had slipped out before I'd thought them through.

"It was just a joke," I said, brushing him off.

After meeting up with the crew in the kitchen, which consisted mostly of Arab workers, they explained the purpose of this part of the college and who we would serve in the cafeteria.

Back home, and particularly in the city of Nablus where my college was located, attacks by the IOF continued. My school closed, and

I worked for Dani for a whole week before I had to go back to the West Bank. After that, I spent most of my time off school working for him, whether it be long holidays, breaks, or weekends. As our people fought one another over the border, Dani and I became good friends. I met his wife and children, and they were decent people. They worked hard to put food on the table, just as my family did. They cherished family values, which I could relate to and appreciate. I saw none of the hate I was used to from the Israelis who came to the West Bank and Gaza in uniform. I wanted to believe that they dumped on us their worst, but I knew that those who served in the army were virtually every high school graduate, male and female, as service is mandatory in Israel. It was unfathomable how they could so easily flip a switch and turn into heartless murderers in the blink of an eye.

As the weeks passed, I began to realize that the institution was one of many that the Israelis used to invite people and delegations from all over the world to educate and indoctrinate them about Israel. This "education" involved showcasing how Israel was a "civilized" state surrounded by violent Arab countries who wished to drive them to the sea. The arguments were carefully crafted, like the claim that they had historic rights to the land based on the archeological findings. Archeology, it seemed, had failed to include the thousands of homes and businesses occupied by Palestinians, just a generation earlier. Since the Israelis had seized control over Palestine, I had always imagined that we were the clear victims, the ones being oppressed. It had never occurred to me that the rest of the world might view us as aggressors. This simple but fundamental realization rocked my world, and explained my confusion as a child, as to how the world could witness our mistreatment, and do nothing.

The more time I spent in Israel, the more I realized that my Jewish friends did not picture me or my cousin when they considered what it meant to be Palestinian. Palestinians were a faceless, angry threat, to be neutralized at all costs. The media, politics, school education programs and the whole system depended on accepting the fact that Palestinians could not be treated as equals and neighbors. We were not even seen as human. We were a problem to be solved. Israelis could wreak havoc on us and then step back into their carefully constructed world, take off

their uniform, and try to forget the damage they had wrought. If they couldn't forget it, they could justify it in the name of righteousness.

Palestinians didn't have that option. I could learn to speak Hebrew, present myself as American, dance and charm, clean and serve, and do everything I could to make them see and accept me, but my place would always be across the razor wire, where being Palestinian was at best, a lifetime of oppression, and at worst, a death sentence.

A Fork in the Road

Stockholm, 2013

The tinny voice of the flight attendant announced our descent into our destination—Stockholm. The announcement woke me, and I clapped a hand to my creased face, wiping the sleep from my eyes. Arriving at the Stockholm Arlanda Airport, I retrieved my luggage, exchanged some local currency, purchased express train tickets, and headed straight for the city center to meet Mr. Karraj, the consular.

For weeks I had argued with myself about this trip. That it was selfish, and that I was falling prey to old frustrations. That I was haunted by ghosts only a therapist could banish—certainly not a long lost, and perhaps mentally unstable, uncle.

In the end, I decided to come for a simple reason. As my wise wife had said, I had to make a decision that I could live with. Returning home with regret would be easier to live with than spending the rest of my life wondering what might have been.

Mr. Karraj was a relatively short man with dark skin and shiny dark hair. He wore a sharp black suit over a white button-up shirt. A thin



Stockholm, Sweden

black tie completed the look. He was well-spoken and fluent in both Arabic and Swedish, as well as English.

As we sat outside a quaint coffee shop overlooking the canals, Mr. Karraj asked me about my uncle, and what we knew of him. I could tell he was a kind man, used to dealing with delicate subjects.

The information I had wasn't much more than what I'd shared with him over the phone. "All his childhood friends and schoolmates agreed that he had a mind of his own, he was smart and stubborn at the same time," I said. I went on to explain that when the war had broken out in 1967, Ghazi was one of the first to resist and fight the occupation forces. He had to flee Palestine the same year since he had become targeted by the occupation forces. From that point on, the only means of communication the family had with him were written letters in the mail that he used to send through a proxy to Jamila. The letters had stopped coming sometime in the early eighties.

"What do you think," I asked when I was done. "Does it sound like it could be him?"

He sat back in his seat, inhaling the last bit of his cigarette then putting it out in the ashtray.

"There was an incident back in the late seventies, early eighties in court houses here in Stockholm, where a few of the more ferocious Palestinian freedom fighters were arrested on charges of concealing weapons and committing attacks against Israeli individuals. The catch was that these individuals were later revealed to be Israeli intelligence assassination squads."

I leaned forward in my chair, hanging onto every word. It was hard to imagine my kind-faced uncle hunting down assassins in Europe, and continuing the resistance fight here, in Stockholm. It sounded like something out of a James Bond film.

"Back in the seventies," Karraj continued, "anybody that belonged to the Palestinian resistance movement was considered a terrorist, especially members of the PLO."

"The Palestinian Liberation Organization," I murmured, and he nodded his approval.

"It wasn't until much later that many European countries changed their views on the Palestinians and recognized their rights. At that time, the government in Sweden reversed those laws and re-defined Palestinians as freedom fighters. Those who had been imprisoned were released."

"Was my uncle one of those men?"

"It's possible. After your family contacted us about his whereabouts, we went to the authorities, but sadly we didn't get far. As you know, the Swedes take citizen privacy very seriously. They'll only release information to a direct and proven family member."

I slumped in my seat. I had no way of proving my relationship to this man, or even gaining enough access to his file to determine if he was my uncle. It was a vicious circle.

"Are you telling me I'll be taking a flight home, empty-handed?" I asked.

Karraj laughed.

"Don't look so deflated. I may not have been able to verify this man's identity, but I was able to procure an address."

I gasped. "You know where he lives?"

Karraj's eyes glinted.

"I know where he lives," he confirmed.

The thought was too big to comprehend. Confronting this man in his home wasn't exactly the official process I had anticipated, but if I was comfortable with skirting the rules, Karraj said he would be happy to accompany me.

Assuming a feigned expression of nonchalance, I agreed to meet him at the address the following day. I needed one night to gather my thoughts.

I checked into a hotel with my mind abuzz, and a growing migraine. For better or worse, tomorrow would deliver answers or a dead end. I tried to prepare myself for either.

The following morning, we pulled up in front of an apartment complex in a tidy area, with well-tended gardens and wide streets. Children laughed in a nearby playground, and well-dressed people bustled past walking their pampered, pedigree dogs. For years I had imagined

my uncle lying in an unmarked grave or shivering in a jail cell. It seemed strange to think that he could have lived such a hard and daring life, only to end up in this quiet pocket of suburban bliss.

After circling the building a few times, it became obvious which apartment belonged to Ghazi, if that was truly who this man was. It was the only apartment with completely shuttered doors and windows on such a warm and beautiful summer's day.

As we approached the foyer, a young lady in her mid-twenties was coming out, accompanied by a boisterous golden retriever. The consular approached her directly, explaining who we were, and asked her about the old man who lived upstairs. She said that she had been living there for a few years now and that she had seen him only a handful of times during that time. She explained that he didn't speak to anyone and that he had most of his errands run for him by a caregiver who would stop by once or twice a week to bring him groceries and medications.

She didn't even know his name.

We thanked her and headed inside.

Right when we walked in, I saw a big board of residents' names, right there on the second floor was his name, Yones G. My heart started beating so hard. I almost missed the walking aid with a matching name tag which read, Gabriel Yones that was parked along with a couple of bikes tied with a U-lock to the designated bike stand.

Karraj met my eye.



My uncle's name on the building residence sign

"Are you ready?"

I nodded.

"Let's do this."

We headed for the staircase and climbed to the second floor. The apartment was barred with a double security door with three metal outlets: a knob, a regular key, and a security lock. It looked like the door to a prison cell.

We alternated between knocking and ringing the bell, but no one answered, though we could hear movement inside. I spoke through the door, explaining who I was and why I was there, but silence was the only reply. The next ten minutes felt like an eternity, but eventually, we gave up.

"It's probably not him," I said, confused and deflated.

"I disagree." Karraj put his arm on my shoulder. "If it was a case of mistaken identity, he would have corrected us and sent us away. For your uncle, the pain of facing his past might be too great."

We walked out into the sunny garden. I had my back to the building, thanking Karraj for his help when I noticed his eyes widened suddenly. "Gabriel!" he yelled, pushing past me. "Ghazi! Gabriel!"

I spun around to see the form of an old man with a hunched back and gray hair entering his balcony door and slamming it shut behind him.

The entire episode was over in less than a few seconds.

"What did you see?" I asked.

"He came out!" Karraj sighed. "But I spooked him. He looks Palestinian, Mohanad. His skin tone is like yours. I don't know if it's your uncle or not, but he looks like he could be."

Before we parted ways, I retrieved the bag I had left in Karraj's car. It was clear the old man had no interest in talking to me, but I had a few tricks left up my sleeve and I wasn't ready to give up yet.

Crossing the Line

Tel Aviv, Israeli Area, 1996-1999

My double life in Israel continued. By day, I pretended to be American as I worked for the Israelis who'd slowly become my friends. By night, I slunk across the border and was a patriotic Palestinian once more. I was trying to pursue my dreams, but I also felt that I was losing myself along the way.

Still, meeting these Israelis broadened my horizons and helped me to better understand the world beyond Tulkarm, my little town, and its people. I wasn't a closed-minded person by nature, but the amount of segregation, imprisonment, and restrictions the Israelis imposed on us had made it difficult to integrate with the neighboring Arab countries, let alone societies further west. Up until that point, I had not met a European, American, or Jewish person in my life.

Working in the cafeteria for days at a time, I would increasingly spend the nights in the bedroom attached to it. By that time, I was able to read, write, and converse in Hebrew, which felt to me like a distant dialect of Arabic. This feeling would fuel my curiosity to learn more and more about this language and the history of its people.

One day, Dani was throwing a birthday party for his daughter Tova, who was turning fourteen. To my surprise, he invited me to the party at his home, not as a server or to set up the party, but as a guest.

I wanted to decline the invitation, but his wife was standing beside him when he issued it, and she insisted on me coming over. Perhaps she wanted to show off that one of her husband's employees was a smart, young American, or perhaps she was being genuinely hospitable. Regardless of her intentions, I said yes.

Dan had an older house in the Yaffo area. People seemed normal, they were having a good time, drinking and eating, and exchanging gifts. A couple of the invitees worked at the college, so I didn't feel like a stranger.

I complimented Dani on his house, which made him smile with pride.

"I spent a small fortune remodeling it," he said, pointing at some of the art on display. "Would you guys like a tour?"

We could hardly refuse, so we followed him through each room, listening to his well-rehearsed play-by-play of which walls had been knocked out to make rooms bigger, and where he'd had to do other things to upgrade the house while keeping its historical look. We exited the kitchen into a small backyard. Turning back, I noticed a keystone over the door, with an Arabic engraving. It read: ***Hatha men fadl rabbi*** which was a common phrase used to decorate the walls of Arabic homes. It meant "This place by God's grace."

I felt ill.

An Arabic family had built this house, raised their family and animals within its walls, and called it home. Where was that family now? Cast aside in some forgotten place across the border? forgotten in a refugee camp abroad? Dead?

It was true that Israel was a beautiful and modern place, but it had not risen from the dust, appearing out of thin air, seventy-five years ago. They had not built their world, brick by brick, as they liked to pretend. They had appropriated a legacy built by countless generations of Palestinians, then stamped their mark across it and taken the credit.

As I sipped my drink and smiled politely at my host, the hypocrisy of it made me sick with rage.

The Dominican

One of the people who came to experience the Israeli education program was an interesting undergrad from the Dominican Republic, who arrived with a group from the Caribbean. Armando De La Cosa was a young, Christian man who read the Bible and looked forward to visiting Biblical sites. The sparkle in his eyes was clear every time he came to eat a meal in the cafeteria, believing he was being served food by God's chosen ones. We often chatted about Jesus Christ and Christianity, and it became obvious his theological convictions were a massive part of his life.

On the days when Armando did not have lectures or tours, we would invite him to come with us back to the West Bank, and into our homes. As a Black man, he enjoyed the warmth and the sincerity we offered. In class, the Israeli instructor's confidence often felt more like arrogance, and their dogmatic views often bordered on prejudice.

Armando carried a Spanish Bible with him everywhere, and we talked a lot about religion, especially once we explained that we were not Jewish, or Israelis, but Muslim Palestinians. He spoke often of the Israeli Jews as God's chosen people, and how God himself had promised the land to them, even as I tried to explain the persecution our people had suffered. The evidence was everywhere around him, how could he not see it?

Still, despite our disagreements, Armando was a kind person, and he earned my respect through his commitment to his book and religion. I was already a practicing Muslim at the time, I prayed five times a day and read a little of our holy book now and then, but my hectic schedule made my religious practices difficult. Meeting Armando and debating with him forced me to learn more about the Christian and Jewish faiths, as well as diving deeper into my own. I read the Holy books extensively, commentaries, and interpretations. I fell deeply down the rabbit hole: reading the Old and the New Testaments in Hebrew and Arabic. I also became well-versed in comparative religions and interfaith dialogue.

What I learned most from Armando's month-long visit, was that

there was more to the conflict between Palestine and Israel than the military-backed occupation. There were Biblical stories tied to the land, supported by divine scripture that backed this claim. There was also unconditional support for Zionism from Christian authorities, and groups in the West. This support was unshakable, no matter what atrocities the Israelis committed against the Palestinians.

The Judeo-Christian ties were a relatively new alliance. Before this modern-day bond, history was filled with stories of the Christian West persecuting Jews—blaming them for the death of Christ and a host of worldly problems. Slowly, but surely, I was beginning to wrap my head around the magnitude of this new alliance, and its implications in sustaining a colonial occupation.

The American

Adam Goldstone was an American Jewish student who I met in the West Bank, somewhat ironically. He didn't rock a Peyot—those signature sideburns favored by many orthodox Jews—and he dressed in a modern fashion, favoring jeans and T-shirts. Adam also spoke perfect English and almost no Hebrew. He was short, with very curly blond hair, blue eyes, and sharp Caucasian looks.

At the time, he was working on his Ph.D. in anthropology. His research was about the border line between the West Bank and the Israeli areas, and how it separated two peoples with all kinds of inequalities and differences that were set apart with this virtual line. This "virtual wall" would later become an actual wall that protected and separated the wealth and the privileges on the Israeli side from the sorrow and desperation on the Palestinian side.

Adam was refreshing. An impartial, educated outsider, who would see beyond the propaganda, to the truth of what was going on.

Adam had opted to live with a Palestinian family, as he wished to experience life on the border (the green line). The head of that family was Abu el Abed, who worked as a professional construction laborer on the Israeli side. Adam would join Abu as he traveled through checkpoints, which afforded him the true experience of what a Palestinian would have to go through for him to put food on his table.

Two of the children in Adam's host family attended Berziet University, a local college in the city of Ramallah. It was an American university, with an American curriculum, far too expensive for me to attend, but I loved visiting friends who attended and spending a night or two in the luxurious dorms. It was a small taste of what it might have felt like to attend college in the U.S.

Adam learned Arabic and made friends with a lot of people from my city and that college. Upon his return to the U.S., he went on to write a book about the separation between the West Bank and Israel. The book reflected on the effects the borderline had on the Palestinian

population. The book seemed, to me, to be an important perspective that many people in the West would want to know. Apparently not. Instead, Adam relayed that he had faced ongoing challenges in getting the book published. In the nineties, his book portrayed an unpopular, even dangerous point of view, that countered the mainstream narrative of that time.

Despite the disappointing end to Adam's publication journey, he had taught me a valuable lesson: that not all Jews are racist, and not all Jews are blindly pro-Israel. We became good friends and have stayed in touch.

After that, I started digging into the identity of Zionists and realized they could be Jewish, Christian, or even Muslim. This distinction was important because it allowed me to free myself of racism. I would no longer hate Jews in general for the crimes that others had committed. I was able to define my real enemy and recognize good people, no matter where they were from or what religion they followed.

Though I was still troubled by the events of my childhood, meeting Adam helped me to identify those responsible. Judaism went far beyond politics and occupation; it was the first of the three great monotheistic religions and the followers of Judaism, like the followers of any faith, could be good, or they could be bad. They couldn't all be painted with one brush. This perspective helped me to continue with my work in the Israeli areas and to foster the relationship I had with my patron, Dani.

As my understanding grew, so too did my horizons. Life turned from a dark picture of violence and survival to one of possibility. With this shift in mindset, I became even more determined to travel to the U.S., and I started to actively pursue the visa that would allow me to travel there.

A year later, my cousin received a call from our Dominican friend, Armando, that he had returned and was working as an assistant in his country's consulate in Tel Aviv.

Throughout that summer, we would visit him in Tel Aviv, or he would come to the West Bank. The more time we spent together, the stronger our friendship grew.

The consulate in Tel Aviv was not a grand building like the other

embassies in that area. Instead, it was a simple ground-level apartment converted into office space that he assured us was temporary.

"When the two countries establish a full diplomatic relationship, it will be converted into an embassy, with a much bigger building," he explained. As of the summer of 1998, however, it was a tiny apartment with the master bedroom serving as the consul's office. Armando had an office to himself next door, and a little desk for Rosa, his secretary, in the main hall. Rosa was a local Jewish lady who was bilingual and spoke both Spanish and Hebrew fluently. She didn't like me and Khaldun visiting, so we kept our visits short. We also had a code name for the man Armando worked for: Pavarotti. He looked exactly like the Italian opera singer, with the same build, the same dark beard, and swarthy good looks. I only met him once, but he would go on to change my life in the most miraculous way.

One day, Armando greeted me with news. The consulate had received two tickets to attend the 4th of July celebration in the American Ambassador's villa, in the town of Herzliya on the Mediterranean. It was an honor to be included. As he took in my eager expression, his face fell.

"Even I don't get to go, Joe. Only Mr. Pavarotti and his wife will attend."

I had been pressuring Armando to try to find a way to introduce me to the American Ambassador, in the hope of applying for a visa, but as time went on, it became clear that wasn't going to happen.

Which is why, when Armando called me just two days before the celebration date with the news that Mr. Pavarotti couldn't make it after all, I yelled loud enough to bring my co-workers running into the room.

The words he spoke that day would change my life, forever.

"It looks like you and I are going to the celebration at the ambassador's residence, my friend. Time to buy a suit."

Plan A, Plan B

Stockholm, Sweden, 2013

It wasn't that big of a backyard, but it had a couple of tables and chairs, the heavy metal kind you'd usually find in a public park. There was a designated smoking area nearby, which I hoped might aid an introduction to some of the building's occupants.

I set the contents of the bag on the table, which included some blank pages as well as photos of my uncle, Jamila, and my other uncle, Ghazi's brother. The pictures were old, faded black and white, but they were the only ones I was able to find dated close to the time he left. I hoped it would prove that I was family, and not some Mossad spy trying to finish him off. It sounded far-fetched, but dozens of resistance fighters had been killed by assassins even after reaching the apparent sanctuary of a neutral Western country. This has been the creed of the Israelis since its inception, the motto for Mossad is "By way of deception, thou shalt do war," and that is exactly how they operate. They will do anything to achieve their goals, even if it takes assassinations, infiltration, car bombs, booby-trapped pagers or cellphones, chases into European countries or



My uncle when he was eighteen

the far reaches of Asian states, they will do it. I couldn't blame my uncle for being paranoid.

I had written a few letters and tried to include as much information as possible—the current day and year, my journey so far in finding him. I also promised that if he opened the door, he would find only me waiting outside.

I rang the bell again and again and knocked on the door while listening carefully for any movement from within.

Eventually, I slid the note through the mail slot. It was written on the back of a picture of him aged seventeen, which I had printed in the hotel's business center. I followed it up with a second picture of his mother and siblings. All the while, I kept talking, sensing him, just on the other side of the door.

"I'm your nephew," I repeated, over and over again. "Please, Uncle Ghazi, I need to see you. Your family is concerned about you and your well-being."

I told him there was no reason for him to be afraid. That I represented people who loved and remembered him.

For all my earnest pleas and nostalgic photos, I was met once more with only stony silence. It was disheartening, to say the least.

I stayed by the door for close to half an hour, making no progress before I thought to ask his neighbors for information. I rang their bell, but they didn't answer either. If it wasn't for the young woman with the golden retriever we met when we first arrived, I would have presumed that this building was occupied by ghosts.

Despondently, I made my way down the stairs and back to the backyard. This time, I took a seat that overlooked the old man's balcony, so I wouldn't miss him opening his door if he deigned to do so. Then I started writing.

It was obvious that the old man wished to be left alone, but I was nothing if not determined. My stubbornness led me to learn new languages and cultures and pushed me to travel. It compelled me to keep trying, long after my enthusiasm had faded. Now, it had led me here. If I had come all this way simply to help the old man, I would have given

him the peace he demanded, but helping him was only a small part of my motivation. Instead, I thought of my mother, and the hope in her voice when I'd told her I would fly to Sweden. I pictured my grandmother and the promises I had made. The thing about a traumatic past is that long after it is over, it stays with you. I could try to forget and move on, but what would I tell my daughter when she asked what had become of our scattered family? To say that we had become estranged and given up on one another, felt too much like defeat. I wanted her to grow up believing that nothing could overcome family and love. That even amid violence and prejudice, you could heal and recover.

My uncle had lost more than any of us could imagine. If I could bring him back from the dead, anyone could be redeemed and healed. The seven-year-old within me, who seemed more present every day, desperately longed for that to be possible.

If I was honest with myself, the healing I desired most of all was my own, and somehow it felt intimately tied to this man I'd never met.

I continued to write with conviction. I had hoped it wouldn't come to this, but it was the only option I had left. With a heavy heart, I shared the news that Jamila had passed away, a little over two years earlier and that her dying wish had been to find her son.

A few minutes later, as I pushed the letter through the slot, I knew I had done all I could. If this wasn't enough, at least I had delivered Jamila's words to this man, who I knew in my heart was her son.

This time the silence was broken by a tiny sound, so faint I almost missed it. At that moment, I knew I had been right to let my intuition guide me. I also knew without a doubt that the man in that apartment was my uncle because that was the only explanation for the quiet sobs that seeped through the heavy door that separated us.

As I listened to Ghazi, a perfect stranger, crying alone in his apartment, my eyes grew hot and wet. I missed my grandmother every day, but more than that, I missed all the time we'd lost together. Opportunities that could never be reclaimed.

I could only imagine how my uncle felt as this same realization washed over him.

I didn't know why I imagined that he had his back to the door, and that he slid downwards while he was reading that letter, leaning his back on the door and crying as he learned the news about his mother.

For some peculiar reason, I had an emotional breakdown, I mirrored that action. I leaned my back on the door and sat down with my knees to my chest and started crying.

We cried together for a good five minutes, then all sound from the other side of the door vanished.

Eventually, my tears dried, and my breath slowed. The silence was complete on the other side of the door. I got to my feet, wiped my cheeks, blew my nose, and picked up my bag. It was time to leave—to return to the family that was waiting for me. Never had I felt so grateful for them.

It hadn't been the warm reunion I'd hoped, and I would not be bringing a long-lost brother back to the fold. My daughter would never meet her great-uncle, and we would never learn the true story of what had happened to him or discover why he had abandoned us. Those hopes had been naïve, just as I'd feared.

I would leave Stockholm with the knowledge that my uncle was no longer adrift. He knew that his mother had passed away and that his sister missed him. He knew that he was not alone.

As fresh tears rolled down my cheeks, I had also finally faced the grief that no amount of travel, education, or success had been able to stifle. All that running was exhausting, and I had become a master at avoiding emotion. When you bury trauma, you become numb, and you start to feel nothing at all. It had been years, perhaps decades since I'd allowed myself to cry, and in the wake of that release, I breathed in a new peace, a revelation. One that might have taken years to find on a therapist's sofa.

It wasn't everything I'd hoped for but in some ways, it was more, and that would have to be enough.

Fourth of July Celebration

Tel Aviv, Israeli Areas, 1999

I STARTED TO PREPARE EARLY on the day of the American consular celebration, eager to make a good impression. I went out and got a nice haircut, shaved my face, then put on the nicest, most professional suit I owned. Fiddling with my collar and tie, I faced the mirror, role-playing how I was going to greet the ambassador. A winning smile was a must, as was my almost perfect American accent. Surely, he would see the potential in me—recognize the wisdom in helping such a worthy and charming young man.

My appearance perfected, I asked my mom to wish me luck. She thought I was following a big business endeavor. I didn't have the heart to tell her that this opportunity might take me one step closer to leaving Palestine. As happy as she would be for me, I had no desire to break her heart unless I had to, and nothing was set in stone yet. As I left, my mother kissed me on the cheek, oblivious to the many secrets I carried.

Armando and I arrived at the ambassador's residence and struggled to find a parking space. The whole neighborhood was packed with fancy vehicles. Like most of the regular guests, we parked some distance away and hiked back to the villa. We presented the invitation cards and passed through a metal detector gateway and security check. We were in!

The ambassador's home was a huge villa in Herzliya, overlooking the sea. As was to be expected, it was in one of the most secure neighborhoods in the country. The front garden was enormous and surrounded by a high wall with surveillance cameras mounted on top.

The event itself was far more luxurious than any I had ever worked, let alone been invited to. The scene was glamorous, a festival of lights, with fancily dressed men and women enjoying the extravagant atmosphere. I thought of America's famous entreaty: Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. I wanted to run to the ambassador and collapse in his arms, begging for sanctuary. Unfortunately, that wasn't how things got done.

Once the hosts had established our relative unimportance, we were ushered out into the garden, as VIPs milled around inside. I was a twenty-three-year-old Palestinian man, with no idea of the magnitude of the deals taking place behind the thick white walls. I couldn't fathom the importance of the politicians and diplomats at the party—persons of impact, not just regionally, but globally. I noticed that I was one of very few Arabs in attendance and commented as much to Armando.

"For people from the West Bank and Gaza, the U.S. consulate organized another gathering in Ramallah," he explained. "It was headed by Wajdi Odeh, the guy from Nazareth who works at the embassy's commercial delegation. Khaldun's father knows him well," he added, "he's working with him to expand his business into the United States."

"I know him, I know Wajdi!" I exclaimed. I was still working sporadically for my uncle and had met the diplomat a few times in Nablus. I made a mental note to explore that avenue to get to the U.S. if my current plan didn't work out.

Despite the knowledge that a separate event was being held, it was still surprising to find myself the only Palestinian in attendance. I certainly drew a lot of wry looks. I tugged at my collar and brushed a bit of lint from my jacket, wondering if people were staring at me, or my cheap suit. I fought the impulse to pick up a tray and get to work.

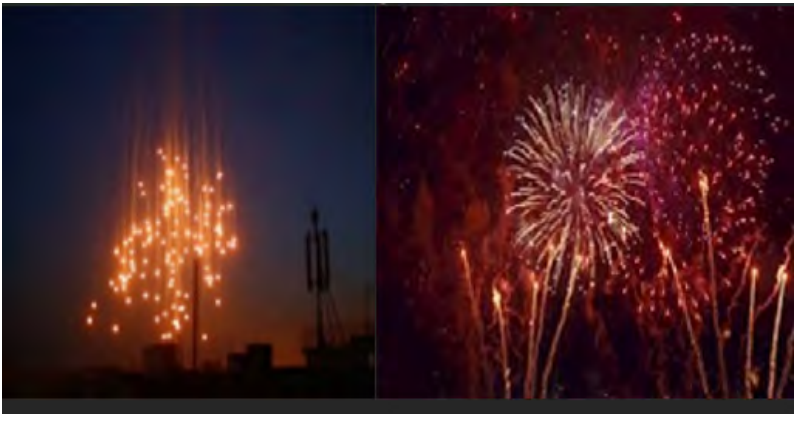
Instead, Armando encouraged me to enjoy myself, enjoy some snacks, listen to music, and shake hands with several delegates. At one point, a line of limousines with tinted windows entered through the gate and drove up to the garage behind the villa. As one pulled out, a security guard gestured for it to stop, and then handed a bag to the person in the back seat. It was cabinet member David Levy. I recognized his head of gray hair and the signature glasses. My jaw dropped at the sight of such a high-profile Israeli official, the likes of which I would usually only see on television.

As the night progressed, I began to understand how the party was divided. The yard outside was designated for delegations from foreign embassies, while the interior of the villa was allocated to high-classification ambassadors and Israeli officials who would meet with the American ambassador directly. I stifled a chuckle. I was at a Zionist gathering

of the highest order—an imposter who'd spent the afternoon in front of his mirror, practicing how I might best impress the ambassador. I could only shake my head at my own foolishness.

After about an hour, it was time for the speeches and fireworks display. We took our seats and watched as the ambassador and his VIP guests—including the head of the country, and the prime minister—ventured outside. Many high-profile cabinet members joined them, men I had seen on Israeli news stations, passing laws and arguing legislation in the Knesset—the unicameral legislative branch of the Israeli government. These were men directly responsible for the policies that caused hardship and suffering for my people. As they laughed and sipped champagne from crystal flute glasses, I wondered if they ever smelled the blood on their hands. Once again, it felt as though I was the only person in the room with their eyes open. On the other side of the apartheid wall, just fifteen miles to the east, waited huddled, exhausted masses, yearning for freedom. They feared fighter jets, while we watched fireworks.

The ambassador opened the festivities with a speech met with loud applause, but I didn't hear a word of it. Instead, my runaway train of thought was interrupted by a loud bang right over our heads. I ducked, reflexively, my heart racing as I looked upward, expecting an imminent IOF attack. Instead, bursts of green, gold, and pink bloomed across the sky—thousands of dazzling stars. I rose in astonishment as the fireworks



Bombs to the left, fireworks to the right.

painted the delighted faces in blooms of color. There was no clear and present danger, but the glowing embers of the fireworks were eerily like the falling cluster munitions that could wipe out an entire neighborhood in a single strike. I wanted to run inside, to flee from the ominous sight, but I stood fast, silently hoping that Armando had not noticed my strange behavior.

In the days following the party, Armando must have sensed my disappointment. He asked me to stop by his consulate and to bring my passport with me.

When I arrived at his office, I had no idea what to expect. Had he managed to pull some strings? Had he met an American diplomat at the party, and had I been too paralyzed with fear over the fireworks display to notice?

Armando, with his charitable Christian heart, was not able to offer me a visa to the USA, but he had secured one which allowed me to go to the Dominican Republic. As he affixed the visa to my passport and added a stamp, it dawned on me that this was the closest I had ever been to leaving my homeland, but instead of joy, I was overwhelmed with disappointment. I hugged my friend and hoped he would mistake the emotion in my voice for excitement.

I didn't want to go to the Dominican Republic. While I was sure it was probably a fascinating country, it didn't offer me what I truly desired: a future, where anything was possible and I could reach my full potential. Only in America would my anger be met with justice, and my confusion with clarity. There, the world would finally make sense.

Or so I had believed.

As I sat on the bench outside Armando's office, I was faced with some hard truths. For years, I had been chasing this dream of traveling to the U.S. It had occupied me to the point of obsession. I was getting older, but I hadn't graduated from college or established a solid business in Palestine. I had avoided any kind of romantic attachments, and the illegal side jobs I had been doing on the Israeli side of the border were no foundation for a bright future.

Instead, I had bet everything on a future elsewhere. A future that wasn't promised, and was threatening to undermine my reality.

I had to accept that the dream was over. At least my mother's heart would not be broken, and I could at least be happy about that.

Suitcase and Souvenirs

Stockholm, Sweden, 2013

I TOOK A TRAIN BACK to my hotel in the city center, and through the window, I watched the world pass by. A thousand different lives blurred beyond the glass, each as complex as my own. It was not the first time I had faced failure, nor would it be the last. I had made the classic mistake of hoping for too much and underestimating the challenges. Often, life proved I was overconfident, but it still stung.

Over the intercom system, they announced the name of my approaching stop. As soon as I got back to my hotel room, I started to gather my belongings. I was ready to check out and head to the airport, to look for any connecting flight that would get me home as quickly as possible. While I was putting items into my luggage, I put my shaving kit pleather case next to my phone, I froze for a second.

No doubt my mother was pacing our family home in the village, whispering prayers and waiting for news. I needed to call her. Once that was done, I'd book a flight and call my wife, so that she'd know to expect me home early.

I dialed my mother's number but the second I heard the ring signal, I hung up. I needed to organize my thoughts and break the news to her as gently as possible. Taking a few minutes to gather myself, I dialed a second time, only to hang up just as quickly.

Perhaps it would be easier to call my wife first.

She answered on the first ring.

"Hi, honey. How did it go?"

"I have good news," I said, forcing a smile into my voice. "I'm coming home early."

"Early... why? What happened, was that man not Ghazi?"

"It is Ghazi, or at least, I think it's him, but he wouldn't speak to me. I think... " I paused for a moment, "I think he's just been through too much."

There was no need to say anymore, my wife understood immediately. She adopted a soothing tone, smoothing away my disappointment. "You knew you were going to face challenges, but you did it anyway, Mohanad. Don't blame yourself, honey, you did the best you could. And we're all so proud of you for trying."

"Thank you." Her words of reassurance meant more than she could know.

We spoke for a few more minutes, mostly about our daughter, and what gifts I could bring back for her. I promised to email my flight details as soon as I had them and then hung up, trying to shake the emptiness that had settled in my stomach.

On the desk lay my passport, the great seal of the United States emblazoned on the cover. I studied the proud eagle, with the olive branch in one talon and a cluster of arrows in the other. The eagle's head was turned toward the branch, symbolizing that it would always work for peace. But it still held the sharply pointed arrows. If war was required, the U.S. would be ready.

I traced that famous image with my fingers, then picked up the passport and slipped it into my breast pocket, right over my heart. I considered all that this one document meant to me, and how radically it had changed the course of my life.

I was ready to go home.

Another Favor from Khaldun

Tel Aviv, Israeli Areas, 1999

My dream to leave Palestine had ended. It was time for me to accept that my destiny lay in my homeland. It was time to grow up and commit to a life there.

I threw myself into working for my cousin, Khaldun, and his family in their textile business, working my way up the ranks. My relentless pursuit of education, networking, and diplomacy had proven futile. The odds were too stacked against people like me. At least family could be counted on—the people who truly knew you and saw the value you had to offer. Grateful for the opportunity, I served my uncle-in-law and his family to the very best of my ability.

One day, my cousin revealed that they aspired to create trade relationships overseas. He watched me carefully, gauging my reaction as he added that they might even open an office in the U.S.

A jolt of adrenaline coursed through me, even as I smothered my excitement. It was just talk, at least for now, and it would be wiser for me to focus on the work at hand. Besides, if anyone was selected to travel for the company, surely my cousin or his father would be the first choice. I assured them both that I was committed to helping the business achieve its potential.

No one was more surprised than I was when, mere weeks later, I was selected as part of the company's overseas delegation. I learned later that it was my proficiency in English that secured me the coveted spot. As I organized the paperwork for the commerce department of the American embassy, I was still waiting for the other shoe to drop. Ironically, I was interviewed by the same diplomats I had met at the ambassador's residence months earlier, who proceeded to fast-track our documents. I couldn't help but wonder if all my years of dreaming, and all the steps that had led me to this point, might've been part of the plan all along.

Our main point of contact with the embassy was Khaldun's older brother, Fadi. I would call in, daily, to check whether he'd received

word from the embassy. Two weeks into this harassment, Fadi, understandably, stopped taking my calls. I was left a nervous wreck, frantically pacing my cubicle and expecting the worst. We had a sound case for our application, and my contacts in the embassy had promised they would help, but I had spent a lifetime cultivating a very close friendship with disappointment. As time dragged on, my hopes began to dim.

A full month had passed when Fadi eventually called to let me know that I was the proud new owner of a United States visa that would not only allow me entry but allow me an extended stay on American soil while we set up the office there.

My mother's heart was sure to be broken, but it was the greatest moment of my life.

My enthusiasm dimmed somewhat in the face of the conversation I needed to have with my parents. I was leaving the country, which would no doubt stir up conflicting feelings, especially for my mother. She had already said goodbye to my two older brothers—Suliman had graduated from college and migrated from Jordan to Canada in pursuit of professional life, while Nasri was in his senior year, studying architecture at a Jordanian college. His return to Palestine was highly unlikely—we suspected he would follow in Suliman's footsteps and make his way to Canada upon graduating.

For people living in privilege, travel is a wonderful experience—an adventure of discovery and excitement. For many Palestinians, it was a means of escape and a permanent goodbye.

Guilt reared its ugly head. My parents were getting older, and I was the only mature male child left to take care of them. This was the only social security system in place for the Palestinian people; parents took care of and provided for their children, and when the children grew up, they returned the favor. It felt as though I was not only abandoning them but my duty.

We sat drinking endless cups of tea and spoiled ourselves with a slice of cake. My mother sat perched on the couch, waiting to hear the exciting announcement I had promised. My father gazed out of a window, lost in thought.

"You both know I've had this dream for a while now..." I began, but

I didn't get any further. My mother's eyes were already filled with tears.

"You got the visa," she interrupted, finishing my sentence for me. Her voice was low and gentle, filled with a combination of hope, and grief.

"I got the visa," I confirmed. I forced a smile that felt more like a grimace. How could something so wonderful feel so awful at the same time?

As my mother wept, I tried to fill the silence with a dozen different reasons for why this was the best news. After a time, I didn't know if I was trying to convince her or myself.

My father had been quiet up until then, but he finally spoke up.

"If this is truly what you want to do with your life, Mohanad, we support you." He cast a concerned look at my mother, wondering how much he could say without upsetting her further. "Never forget, my son, that you are Palestinian. You have the right to pursue your destiny, just like any other man. We would never stand in the way of your dreams."

Even if they come at the expense of our own.

The last part was unspoken, but I felt it all the same. I hugged them both, feeling simultaneously like a selfish son, and the king of the world.

An Obstinate Uncle

Stockholm, Sweden, 2013

I HAD NOT PACKED MY BAGS.

I had not booked a flight or checked out of my hotel.

All those plans had been put on hold, as whatever logic I possessed abandoned me in favor of the stubborn, obsessive persistence I had inherited from my grandmother. Any sane man would have been on his way home. I was in a taxi, driving back to my uncle's apartment.

Arriving at the building, I went straight to the back and took a seat in the garden. Knocking on the old man's door was an exercise in futility, and I wasn't going to waste any more time doing that. This time, I had a different, somewhat outrageous, plan.

With my eye fixed on the balcony above, I called 112—the local emergency number, the equivalent of 911 in the States. I asked for an English speaker. The officer was friendly, and bilingual, and switched immediately to English. I hastily told her my version of the story, which was true enough, but not quite the whole truth. It was necessary to get law enforcement to help me, and it would do no good if they shut me down due to privacy policies.

The officer listened while I explained that I had traveled from the U.S, to check up on my uncle—a man in his late seventies, and of poor health. I told her, quite truthfully, that my mother was concerned because she had not heard from him in some time. In this instance, "some time" was forty years, but I opted to omit that fact. The point I emphasized was that my uncle was an elderly man, with no family members in Sweden, who may or may not have fallen and injured himself, or worse, become confused and lost. That last bit was my only blatant lie. To my knowledge, the old man was most definitely still closeted inside his apartment.

The officer was understanding. She told me to hang tight and confirmed that she was going to try to contact him by telephone before they sent a patrol out. I exchanged contact information with her and waited,

my eyes fixed on the balcony window. I half expected to see an angry face, with a phone pressed to one ear, staring back.

Minutes ticked by, then hours.

I wondered if the neighbors might report me to the authorities for loitering at the edge of a children's playground.

Finally, my phone lit up with a foreign number, and the same officer who'd talked to me earlier greeted me, an apologetic tone in her voice. My uncle was fine, she said. He was in the apartment and recognized me at his door as a family member, but he didn't wish to take in visitors. He would write me a letter and leave it outside his door the following morning.

It wasn't enough, but it was more than I could have hoped for. I thanked the officer for her time and hung up.

It was sunset by that time, so I accepted a generous invitation from Mr. Karraj to join him and his family for dinner. As I updated them with the day's events, they listened with kindness and sympathy and offered to include my uncle in their prayers. Grateful, I bid them goodnight and returned to the solitude of my hotel room.

The following morning, I climbed the stairs toward that impenetrable apartment with my heart in my throat. There was no obligation for the old man to do as he promised. Having been assured of his safety, emergency services would not intervene if I called again.

Which is why I did a double take when I saw the envelope on the floor. It was a fair way from the door, as though it had been shoved through the mail slot rather than placed there.

I snatched it up and tore it open.

The note inside wasn't very long, but it set a heavy weight on my chest. The old man confirmed that he knew exactly who I was, and that he was in fact, my uncle. Although, he had no desire to meet me, and he asked that I leave immediately.

Thank you, and goodbye.

My brain stuttered to a halt. After all of this, he thought he could just send me on my way. Temper fraying, I snatched the pen from my pocket.

I can't remember the exact words I used but suffice it to say my message implied that if he wanted to see me gone this side of the millennium, he would have to face me, man to man.

I sent the note through the slot, and it felt like only a minute had passed when it was spat back out. For a second, I thought Ghazi had simply thrown it back at me, but then I noticed a fresh line of text. And so it went, for an hour. Back and forth, with Ghazi reiterating his need for solitude, begging me to leave, and then, when that didn't work, trying to order me to do so. I remained calm. Though it hadn't been his intention, my uncle had opened a channel of communication, however fragile, and I was desperate to keep it open. I replied with patience, emphasizing that we were family and that I would never wish any harm upon him. I highlighted our mutual connections—my mother, Jamila, and the homeland we both loved. I felt in my heart that our meeting was now a certainty, it was only a question of how long he'd keep me waiting in the cold corridor, without so much as a cup of tea. The thought reminded me of one avenue I hadn't tried yet, a lesson I had learned from Jamila. If there was one way to crack a Palestinian, it would be to appeal to their sense of hospitality.

He cracked in the end, as I'd known he would, but it seemed that my legendary stubbornness truly was genetic. Ghazi would need some time to tidy his apartment but agreed to see me at nine o'clock, the following morning.

Face to Face

My uncle had promised to invite me in at nine, but as it happened, it took hours for him to bring himself to open the door. I didn't mind waiting. I couldn't imagine how difficult it must be for him to break four decade's worth of paranoia and isolation.

Eventually, I heard the blessed sound of multiple locks being freed. I clambered to my feet, wide-eyed, as the door opened, barely a crack. I held my breath, terrified to spook him. After a full minute, during which I suspect Ghazi contemplated slamming the door and calling it off, the door slowly widened enough for him to peer through, as though checking one last time that he wasn't being set up.

I stared back at him, awestruck.

The old man before me looked exhausted. Deep wrinkles lined his once handsome face, and wild, Einstein-like waves of gray hair all over his head. His eyes, however, were as sharp as flint, he took me in, his expression unreadable. He examined the corridor behind me, then straightened his tall frame, and opened the door.

As I stepped fully inside, he turned and allowed me to study him from head to toe. It was as though he was letting me see all of him and form my own opinion. I'm not sure what reaction he expected, but I instinctively opened my arms, stepping closer to embrace him. Too late, I realized my mistake. For a man who avoided human contact, I suspected the gesture would be far too intimate. To my surprise, a small smile crossed Ghazi's lips, and he surprised me by stepping forward and pulling me to him. In that intimate moment of human contact, I felt as though I was standing there on behalf of so many others—his sisters, his brother, his mother, and his father. The spirits of all those who loved him, the living and the dead.

The hug was silent, but it contained a thousand memories, secrets, and stories. An endless sea of disappointments and mistakes, silences and broken promises. It was a void of time and emptiness that could never be replaced. But it was also forgiveness and rebirth.

It felt as though he was hugging his parents' little house with the small yard that had the rope swing tied to the branches of the tree, and the water well with the fetching pail. It felt as though he was hugging the little animals and chickens that shared the yard with them growing up, and the little dirt roads and trails he used to take up and down the town to go to his school. And everything else my grandma used to tell me about his memories from his childhood. I'm sure he embraced all of those memories and many other memories I never learned about.

On the other hand, while we held each other, an emotional explosion blew up in my heart as well as in my mind. My heart was overjoyed —I had met the man! It was melting remembering Jamila and her wish of seeing him. I knew I was able to face her memory now with a straight face. In my heart I felt love and bliss. Meanwhile, in my mind a quick tape of events was playing, from the attack on my school to the hot chases when leaving it. From the face-off with occupation soldiers, children throwing stones at the fully armed IOF, to the beatings we used to get as children by them. From the misery at checkpoints, to the distress at the borders leaving the country. I too had unsolved issues that were caused by the same group, a multitude of events that traumatized me as a child, and kept dragging into my adulthood.

Now they are surfacing up, I can see them one by one. I can identify the events, when they happened, how they happened and more importantly, I can identify they are still alive within me affecting my daily life. While I was still hugging him, a tear came down my face and onto his shirt over his shoulder, when I saw me as a child crouching and shaking under the bed while the sound of bullets was ripping around and through the walls of our house. I didn't cry as a child, I was scared to death, but I forced the tears back and bottled everything inside. Now they finally came, and I didn't stop them — I let them fall as I made peace with my memories. I was hugging them embodied in my uncle, I was realizing those traumatizing scars are turning into medals of honor that I need not to be ashamed or afraid of. I can be proud of those scars, I can display them as medals on my chest instead of hiding them inside it. I can live with those memories instead of them living within me.

The tears came again, but this time I didn't fight them. I couldn't have, even if I'd wanted to. They flowed freely from us both.

Eventually, we broke apart, and I turned to wipe my face and gather myself. Through eyes blurred with tears, I took in a decent-sized apartment. A lot of furniture was piled in the rooms and hallways and covered with white sheets—perhaps Ghazi was a hoarder or a germaphobe. The place was strange, but that was almost to be expected, given the reclusive lifestyle of its sole occupant, but it was clean, and it was safe, for which I was relieved.

The kitchen was clearly where Ghazi spent most of his time. He had added padding to the armrests of the chairs, and he's stuck tennis balls to the bottom of the legs, to make it easier for him to move them around. Stacks of mail and magazines were piled up next to his phone.

We sat in the kitchen, and he offered me coffee and some Swedish pastries that were the same brand I enjoyed from IKEA back in the States.

We started talking, and for three long days and nights, we didn't stop.

Occasionally, Ghazi would nap in his chair and, too terrified to leave lest he lock me out again, I would do the same, always waking the second he stirred. With the shades down on every window, I kept little track of whether it was day or night.

Over those three days and three nights, Ghazi told me his story, and I hung onto every word, riveted.

Together, we journeyed back, all the way back to when he was graduating high school and preparing for college. Wanting to join the resistance, he wrote a letter to the King of Jordan, asking him to accept him into the liberation forces. A high-ranking general in King Husain's government, who was Palestinian and knew my grandfather, Ghazi's father, read the letter and returned it to my grandfather, warning him that such foolish words would quickly get his son arrested, abducted, or worse. According to Ghazi, the 1948 and 1967 wars had been staged, with their outcome predetermined. The men who joined the Arab army were issued broken, ineffective weapons, and sent to their deaths. It was the leaders of Arab countries, supposedly allies, that had committed this treason.

When my uncle learned that the Jordanians were not in support of the Palestinian resistance, he decided to form a local movement against the Occupation forces, with the help of some friends. They had no money, weapons, or resources, but they had the courage of youth, the desperation of the oppressed, and the grim determination of those with nothing left to lose.

Except my uncle did have something to lose.

At eighteen, IOF soldiers discovered his identity and chased him through Jordan and Algeria until Ghazi finally found his way to Sweden and sanctuary.

He pursued his higher education and at the same time was working with Palestinians and Westerners to spread awareness of the genocide in his homeland. I was struck by the thought that, thirty years later, I had followed a similar crusade in the U.S. The Israeli death squads were continuing to target Palestinians, so my uncle was also collecting arms and training personnel on how to evade their brutality and retaliate in kind.

My uncle accepted missions deemed impossible and risked his lifetime and time again, such was his conviction. Admittedly, he expected every mission to be his last. In the end, realizing that no matter how much manpower or resources they threw at the problem, Ghazi eluded them, the Israelis gave up on the idea of catching him. Instead, they tipped off the Swedish authorities that they were harboring a known terrorist, who was wanted for the possession of arms and various criminal activities. Ghazi was given a life sentence in a Swedish prison.

My uncle spoke with a quiet acceptance. He was a humble man, who had lived an extraordinary life. He was driven by a passion and conviction that made mine pale in comparison. He also carried scars—more than any person should have to bear. He had fought for the justice he believed in, and the comrades he loved, but he had paid a terrible price. He hadn't wanted a wife to cry over his grave, or children who'd grow up without a father. There were few friends he could trust, and those he did were often killed.

He had lived alone, with only memories for company.

I had made sacrifices in my life, but I had gained much in return. Even so, listening to my uncle made me realize how much time I had

spent lost in the past, fighting battles that had no name. Feeding an anger that had no outlet.

After spending ten years inside prison, Ghazi had become eligible for release, and he and a few of his colleagues had been freed. As Karraj had mentioned, the view on Palestine in the West, particularly in Europe, had slowly begun to change, thanks largely to people like my uncle who fought endlessly to promote the truth.

My uncle had entered his prison cell as a young man and exited it much, much older. Caught in the time capsule of a hundred-and-fifty-foot prison cell, the world had flown by without him. Even years after his release, it was clear that he struggled to grasp the passage of time, asking why his mother looked so old in one of the pictures I'd slid through the mail slot days earlier. That picture had been taken only nine years after he'd left. Sadly, I wondered what he would have thought if he had seen her right before she died, as a sickly woman in her late eighties. To his mind, my grandmother was still a young woman in her prime.

More Scars

For my uncle, the hardest thing about being in prison was not the isolation or the cold and cramped living conditions. It was receiving mail from his mother and siblings. When the news was good, he was reminded of all that he had lost. When the tidings were bad, he was helpless to do anything, guilty of the knowledge that he was only adding to their burden.

Through the letters, he learned that his sister's husband had been killed by the Zionists in a military confrontation. Many times, the letters brought news that the family had been forced to flee once more due to attacks and terrorization.

Ghazi would read those letters and bang his head against the walls of his prison cell. For years, he hadn't replied to any letters, but he'd kept them, and he shared them with me. During one emotional conversation, he'd revealed a stack of letters written mostly by my grandfather and my mother. My grandmother had been illiterate, so she had always dictated her letters, and between them, they had jotted everything down.

Some correspondence included desperate pleas for help. I guessed that was my grandmother's way of putting urgency and emphasis on how dire the situation was to entice him to show up if he was still alive. Instead, it only served to drive him deeper into isolation. With such a high bounty over his head, he was unable to return to Palestine, and with the emotional trauma of everything he had been through, Ghazi had fallen into a deep depression, but for a time he had still believed he would be able to cultivate some semblance of a normal life.

Freed from prison, he went back to school and was able to get a nursing diploma. He began working at a rehab institution, with the intent of helping people. Very soon into his career, however, he noticed that some of the inmates were forming gangs to smuggle drugs into the institution and supply the patients. Determined to do the right thing, Ghazi reported the nefarious activity. Sadly, no good deed goes unpunished. The gang members, upon discovering who had turned them in, brutally attacked Ghazi. He was rushed to the hospital with life-threatening injuries.

He couldn't recall how long he spent in the hospital, but when he finally tried to stand, after a long and extensive period of medical treatment, he found that he couldn't straighten his spine. Medical records would later show that his assailants had broken his back, as well as inflicting a few other serious fractures, on top of the cuts, and head injury. Ghazi is a hunchback to this day.

When he was finally discharged from the hospital, the Department of Labor offered him early retirement, to compensate for the violent assault he had suffered.

His dreams of a normal, functional life were over.

Not only was he unable to fight for Palestine anymore, but he'd become a disabled man with no family to care for him. His depression deepened.

On the third day, I stayed at his apartment, and after numerous attempts to get him outside for some fresh air, Ghazi finally agreed to go out for a short trip to the city.

I had to help him down the stairs and unlock his walking aid from the bike rack, and then we headed down the road to get to the metro station. We moved with agonizing slowness, but I didn't feel any need to rush, and he needed to do it alone. Soon enough, we made it to the city and found a cozy coffee shop. We sat and talked there for a time, and then I told Ghazi I wanted to take him to a restaurant of his choosing for lunch. He insisted that it would be his treat, that he knew of a place he had visited often in the past.

Rather than wound his pride, I gratefully accepted the offer. We took a taxi, but when we arrived at the address, we found a bank in the place of the restaurant.

"Uh, Ghazi..." I murmured, "When exactly did you last eat here?"

He didn't respond, but his cheeks pinked a little in embarrassment, so I figured it must have been years and years since he'd visited.

We ended up eating at a pizza parlor owned by two Algerian brothers, who were so pleased to learn that we were Palestinian that they insisted on treating us with the pizza. Full, and happy, we returned to Ghazi's apartment.

During the taxi ride home, I mulled over how much my uncle had changed in just a few days. He had confronted fears and uncomfortable experiences that he had been avoiding for decades. After such a difficult start I had been certain that, at some point, he would change his mind, shut down, and send me away again. Instead, from the moment he had opened that door, he had committed to see this through. Which I was enormously relieved about because there was one final favor I had to ask of him, one that I knew would be the most difficult of all.

My mother had not heard her brother's voice since she was twelve, almost fifty years earlier. Without giving him time to overthink it, I dialed her number and handed him the phone.

"The only path to peace is to face the things we're most afraid of," I murmured. "You've already come so far, what's one step further?"

It was a twenty-minute call, and they spent most of it crying. They relived memories from long before my time, things that had happened during their childhoods, and people who had impacted their lives, who had passed away.

When the call ended, Ghazi looked empty, exhausted, but relieved.

"Thank you," he murmured, and his eyes shimmered with tears.

I pocketed my phone and helped him back to his seat without another word.

I offered to book a trip for Ghazi to visit Palestine while he was still physically able. Deep down, I knew the deepest peace of all would come from holding his remaining family in his arms, visiting the house of his boyhood, and seeing the homeland he had sacrificed so much for.

He rejected the offer. He said he couldn't bear to visit while the country remained under Israeli occupation, to line up at the border, as a second-class citizen and helpless old man. He couldn't face his people, or the reality of how little had been achieved in his lifetime. I respected his wishes and could only hope that one day he would change his mind.

Like everything else in life, my week-long trip had come to an end. Saying goodbye to Ghazi was hugely emotional. He promised he would try to go outside a little more, and I promised to be there to help and support him, whenever he needed it.

Once I arrived in the city, I visited Mr. Karraj, to update him about everything that had happened and expressed that I wanted to respect my uncle's wish to pass whatever days he had left in the solitary confinement he had chosen for himself. I asked the councilman to protect him from unwanted visitors and to check on him from time to time if he could.

Finally, I told him, quite truthfully, that he had my family's eternal gratitude, and that none of this would have been possible without his help.

As I returned to the U.S., I thought about the false propaganda that had been spread, and about how many people would still view my uncle as a terrorist. So many lies were spread, systematically, preventing my American countrymen from seeing the suffering their misinformed support for the aggressor caused the Palestinian people. How it shattered families and tore them apart. How American tax dollars were responsible for killing, injuring, and traumatizing whole populations of a country that was bound to live in the birthplace of peace.

I took comfort that Sweden and many other European countries were able to see through the propaganda that the Zionists had been feeding them for years. I could only hope that a similar outcome was to become the fate of ***Hasbara*** (Hebrew for Propaganda), the PR tentacle in the U.S. for the Israeli settler-colonial occupation.

The thrill of finding Ghazi aside, my visit to Sweden had far-reaching consequences I hadn't anticipated. There was something broken within me that I didn't realize existed before that trip. Stirred up by the magnitude of Ghazi's tale, new emotions bobbed up in my chest like corks in water. I had believed that in boarding the plane to the States in 2000, I left all my troubles behind me—that I was freeing myself of my past, and all the struggles that went along with it. But the fact of the matter was that my trauma had boarded the airplane with me, hidden deep inside where I couldn't sense it.

Like looking into a crystal ball, the visit to my uncle had, in many ways, shown me an alternate life path. If I chose to pursue the anger that simmered within me, raging against an injustice I could not change, the ultimate destination would be Ghazi's isolation. I saw that now.

I had to find a way to both fight for and defend the country and people I loved. However, it would take love, not fear, for me to walk the right path.

This realization was obvious, but it still came as a shock. I couldn't face all the pain I'd bottled up until I was able to see it for what it was. When I saw my uncle, I saw that pain. When I faced my uncle, I faced the discomfort I'd tried to avoid. When I hugged my uncle, I hugged the broken parts of myself, I'd struggled to accept.

I was forty years younger than Ghazi, my whole life ahead of me, and a beautiful family to spend it with. I had purpose, and ambitions yet to pursue.

For years I'd analyzed my business, and strategized ways to achieve greater efficiency, clarity, and output. What if I were to apply the same kind of focus and intention to the parameters of my own heart?

One of the first steps I took was to take a seat and write it all down. Perhaps if I could pull the truth from within and put it down on paper, I would start to see things more clearly. Memories, events, thoughts, and ideas. Together they had a powerful impact upon me, but they would not overwhelm or destroy me. I could hold onto trauma, but I could also release it. It was time to let it go.

I had flown to Stockholm in search of a victim—a missing man, a hole in the fabric of our family tapestry. I returned to the U.S. filled with the pride of finding a true Palestinian hero, living evidence of the true tenacity of the human spirit. I had finally found that needle in the haystack, and it proved that even amid great fear, hope and change are possible.

Epilogue

Letting Go

City of Tulkarm West Bank, Palestine 1987

My father and I paid a visit to the cemetery to honor my friend, Amjad.

The previous night, I'd had another nightmare, but this time, it had not ended with Amjad lying on the ground in a pool of blood. In this dream, a bright white light broke through the clouds in the sky to reveal two bright figures, who radiated light and peace. The angels had descended from the sky to surround Amjad's crumpled body.

I could almost swear that he was smiling as he floated away as if none of the brutal troubles of our world had a hold on him any longer.

When I relayed the dream to my mother, she insisted that he was in a better place and that he had been rewarded for his bravery, and his sacrifice. She said that I should not be sad anymore, that this dream was Amjad's way of telling me that he was okay and that I should move on.

It was my father who suggested we visit Amjad's grave to pay our last respects. A final farewell. We would leave a bouquet that my mother had constructed with roses from our garden and some palm fronds.

My father and I entered the cemetery together. When we caught sight of Amjad's grave my father stopped, handed me the bouquet, and nodded that I should go ahead.

I approached the grave slowly, placed the flowers atop it, and then knelt with my hands together, as though I might collect raindrops. I read a verse from the holy book—a verse commonly read after the death of a loved one. Once I was done reading, I ran my palms down my face and onto my chest, an act of wiping away sadness and fear.

In the stillness of that moment, memories of Amjad filled my mind: the first time we had met, how he'd always defended me, and how he left us so soon. I honored the memories, but the dream returned, too, and I

knew in my heart it was time to let go, to move on. I needed to survive; to finish school, go to college, and live long enough to pursue my dreams. I needed to do all the things he would have done had he been granted the chance to live long enough.

Already in my short life, I had witnessed death and brutality. Our war had no end. It passed from one generation to the next, like a poisoned chalice. As my life continued in Palestine, there would be more heartache to come, but I couldn't give up, under any circumstance. If it didn't kill me, it would make me stronger.

I needed to do it, for me, for Amjad, and for my people.

After a second's pause, I got to my feet and returned to where my father stood. He picked me up, embraced me tightly, then set me back down beside him. Together, we headed back to the car.

"I'm proud of you, Mohanad," my father said. "Some people have big hearts but are crushed by them. Others become strong but hard, like stone. I hope you will always be strong, and big-hearted. That is something no one can take from you."

I put my small hand in his big one. This was a good day when my father's warmth was not overshadowed by his fear and helplessness. I couldn't say what awaited us next week, or even tomorrow, but I would take this day, walking with my father as the sun warmed our backs.

Iskra Books

About Mohanad Alsayed

Mohanad Alsayed is a Palestinian American entrepreneur and storyteller whose work is shaped by the land and history that raised him. Born and raised in Tulkarm, in the occupied West Bank, he grew up in a world marked by both cultural richness and constant instability. His childhood unfolded under military occupation and inequalities marked by apartheid where school days were interrupted by life threatening danger, and where he witnessed—alongside his classmates and community—the daily realities of fear, resilience, and survival.

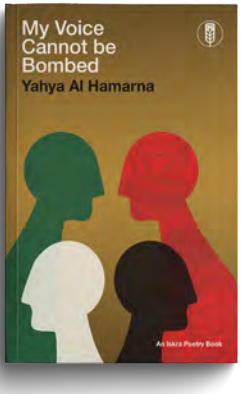
At twenty-three, Mohanad immigrated to the United States in search of opportunity, safety, and a sense of justice that had long been denied to him. Though he built a new life abroad, the experiences and traumas of his early years remained the foundation of his identity. The distance only deepened his connection to Palestine, preserving the memories, losses, and hopes that continue to guide his voice.

His memoir reflects a lifelong effort to document the generational atrocities brought upon the Palestinian people, honor his past, confront generational trauma, and speak to the enduring struggle for dignity, equality, and freedom.

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In Scars and Medals *Mohanad takes readers on an exciting, moving, and decades-long international search for a missing uncle. The memoir is intimate, insightful, and immediately engaging. It will appeal not just to people interested in the politics and history of Palestine, but to anyone who enjoys a good story.*

-Katie Halper, Journalist, Host of The Katie Halper Show, Co-Host of Useful Idiots

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Including conversations with his grandmother who lived through the Nakba, this work shows the intergenerational connection to Palestine and surviving in the face of colonization and occupation. His story is a reminder to us all that Palestinians' existence is resistance, and the most courageous act is to live.

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