



## Childhood Memories of Jerusalem and Ramallah

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General view of Jerusalem. *Source: Khalil Raad collection.*

Jerusalem and Ramallah had a strong influence on me during my childhood years. How I loved those two cities!

Jerusalem was the first city I ever laid eyes on. My father took me with him several times, always on Fridays when he went to buy things for the house and to pray. His identity would shift from that of a workshop boss in rough, khaki clothes to that of a village dignitary in an embroidered robe, wearing a white headscarf and a band on his head. He would regain his prestige, if only for one day each week, as though he must have yearned for his past when he had been the mukhtar of the tribe.

I was always thrilled when my father took me with him and we prepared to make the journey by foot. I would wake to the sound of trains whistling at the station not far from our house. Then we'd climb the peak of the mountain on our way to the city.

We'd take the road that ran alongside the High Commissioner's palace. I would wonder at the silence blanketing the place, for there were no playing children to be seen, and no barking dogs. We would keep walking along the dirt path until we reached the al-Buq'a neighborhood and Hebron Road. We'd cross Jawrat al-'Anab and Birket al-Sultan, and then reach Hebron Gate, where the hanging café was. (This café was demolished by the Israelis following the 1967 war in order to construct a building and so as to continue erasing the original identity of the place.) My father would climb the steps leading toward the café overlooking Hebron Gate, with me leaping behind him, and sit on the balcony with the other men. The sight of the cars would mesmerize me, giving the city a special taste that I'll never forget.

As we entered the old city markets, the many shops with all their goods, and types of food would dazzle me. I would turn and gape in all directions, leaning against my father who held onto my hand so that I wouldn't get lost. One time I did get lost, however. My father had left me in Uncle 'Ayed's shop, which sold wheat, barley, lentils, rice, and preserved milk at the beginning of al-Wad Road. When people from our village went to the city, they always adopted a store as their base, piled their purchases there, and then went unencumbered to the al-Aqsa Mosque or elsewhere, returning again only on their way home. Uncle Ayed grudgingly accepted this overwhelming presence in his shop, the burden being lightened by the fact that the villagers purchased some of their shopping from him.

When my father returned to the shop, he found me in a far corner, asleep on top of the bags of wheat and barely. He woke me up to return home, and I walked beside him through the throngs of people. But after a while I noticed that he wasn't by my side and I searched for him but to no avail. It seems that he'd pushed his way through the crowd without noticing whether I was still with him or not. I was terrified. Suddenly I was alone in a crashing sea of people I didn't know. I froze in my place and cried. But soon I spotted my father looking for me, and I clung to him as we continued on our way again, never letting go.

I nearly got lost another time when my paternal grandfather took us to the convent outside Hebron Gate where the people from our village had their children treated when they fell ill. On that day my mother took my sister to be treated by the nuns, and I went along with them.

There was a long corridor in the convent filled with women and children waiting their turn. The women were absorbed in vague talk about the country's state of affairs; a tension filled the air. Then, a massive explosion was heard, terrifying us all. The nuns locked the large metal gate, and inside the wailing of women was mixed with the crying of children. We remained in this state for quite some time, until we heard heavy knocking at the gate and men shouting. My mother recognized the voice of my grandfather calling her.

My grandfather had hired a small truck, and many women, including my mother, climbed into the back. At the very last moment my mother suggested that I get out and ride in the front with my grandfather. The driver started the motor and I stood on the sidewalk, not knowing what to do. I called to my grandfather, who was absentminded,

and he didn't hear me. The car was about to leave, but then my grandfather noticed me on the sidewalk and I climbed in with him.

When we reached the High Commissioner's palace, it was heavily guarded and the road was blocked off. The British soldiers barred us from passing, and so the truck turned around and after a while we turned off towards the Abu Thur neighborhood. We got out there and walked to Bir Ayub, and then on to Jebel al-Mukabbir. I later learned that the explosion that had taken place while we were in the convent was set off by a Zionist organization. It was trying to blow up the King David Hotel, which was the headquarters of the British Mandate administration, with the goal of hastening Britain's departure from the country. The idea of a national homeland for the Jews had become a reality that could no longer be postponed.

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I watched as the bombs destroyed the buildings tightly packed within Jerusalem's walls and as smoke filled the city's sky. I didn't understand the meaning of the war at that time, but I could grasp its injustice.

My grandfather, father, and uncles would gather near the water well and worriedly watch the shells falling onto homes and places of worship. Many people from our clan would come to watch, lingering until the sun set and it became difficult to see.

Since my grandfather was the head of the clan, the British Mandate authority gave him a radio with a burnished wood casing. During that period, his guest hall was always filled with men who came to listen to the news. None of them ever noticed any sign of the women of the family, for they hid from view to avoid inciting the anger of my grandfather, who was known for his merciless severity.

It was during that time that my oldest maternal uncle volunteered to fight in defense of Jerusalem. He came to our house from time to time carrying a Sten gun. People in my grandfather's guest hall would ask him about news of the fighting, and he would give himself over to telling tales, some of which seemed to be figments of his imagination. He told them that there were Jewish women who had taken up arms and were fighting beside their men. This was puzzling to many of the members of our clan who kept their women locked up at home (and perhaps this was one of the signs of the imminent *nakba*, or catastrophe). This uncle gave me a great deal of attention and care, and brought me toys from the city that filled me with joy. But there were also some controversies about him that provoked the ire of the elders.

Once when he came to our house, I saw him approaching from afar and ran out to meet him. I walked beside him, and when we came across a donkey eating grass in a nearby field, he pointed his Sten at it and told me to pull the trigger. I was terrified and refused, either from fear of using the weapon or out of pity for the donkey. When I told my mother she scolded him, and he let out a long, unconcerned laugh.

Another time he came to our house with a young woman dressed in a manner out of place in our village. Part of her legs and arms were exposed, and her hair flowed freely down onto her shoulders. Before he reached our house I heard my uncle tell someone that she was his fiancéé, and I heard her laugh and agree. I studied the



On 22 July 1946 Menachem Begin, then the head of Irgun, ordered the blowing up of the south wing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, which housed the central offices of the civilian administration. Ninety-one civil servants and civilian visitor were killed, of whom forty-one were Arab. Twenty-eight British, and seventeen Jewish. *Source: Before Diaspora, Walid Khaldi.*

woman and the bare parts of her body, and saw my father frown as my mother tried to hide her discomfort and salvage the situation as best as she could. The woman sat in the house while my uncle stayed outside, trying to clarify the matter to my mother. I would return to the woman every once in a while and study her body anew. I heard my father whisper, “She’s one of the Banat al-Halal which means she is a prostitute,” although I didn’t know what that meant at the time. The reservations of my mother and father towards her visit made me afraid of approaching her, and so I spent the night observing her at a careful distance, until I finally fell asleep.

When I opened my eyes in the morning, I searched for the woman but could find no trace of her, for she and my uncle had left our house at dawn. My uncle didn’t

participate in the fighting for much longer after that, and yet no one ever heard about him again. He disappeared for such a long time that my maternal grandfather thought that he had died, but he later returned and didn't pass away until many years later.

That was all before the battle on the mountain. The night the battle took place my mother woke me from my sleep in a panic. We gathered some of our belongings and left our house in a rush for the al-Jadira neighborhood, where stray bullets couldn't reach. We spent the night there while the men left to fight with old rifles. The sound of explosions and gunfire continued all night long, and shortly before dawn a man came and cried, "The Jews are advancing!" We rushed toward the east and reached the homes of relatives in the al-Hazim neighborhood on the edge of al-Bariya. A few hours later we received news that two of our relatives had been killed. My mother had taken us to the house of one of them, and so we left again and hid behind a nearby boulder, spending the night outside and feeling humiliated. My father joined us two or three days later and we moved to a one-room house in Jebel Abu Mughayreh. We were nervous and unsettled there. One night, I was awakened by my father firing his gun. In the darkness he had made out the figure of a burglar trying to creep into the house through a window left open due to the summer heat. The sound of shells and bullets coming from the distant battle rang in my ears and I was frightened and couldn't get back to sleep. Our house was close to the clash points and we couldn't return to it.

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My paternal grandparents didn't leave the house at that time. The rest of the family, however, was displaced among numerous houses scattered here and there.

Since the circumstances prevented us from returning to our house in Jebel al-Mukabbir, my father chose for us to temporarily live in a small house in the eastern section of our village. One morning, however, my older sister and I decided to visit our old house, perhaps we were led into the adventure by some sort of intuition.

We walked along a dirt road lined with thorns and dry weeds. It was a hot summer day, and so we stopped for a while at a large boulder on the edge of a hill. My sister and I stood there looking at the distance we still had to cross, and felt a little hesitant. Yet our desire to see the house and our grandparents made us take the risk involved with continuing on. We descended towards the al-Shayah road (which wasn't paved at the time), and walked along it a while and then turned left toward Wadi al-Dimas. We crossed the valley and then climbed up towards the Jebel.

The houses there had been deserted by their residents and seemed desolate and intimidating. There were lots of stones and thorns, and there were shady trees everywhere. We were filled with a vague fear of surprises too intense for our tender years, and yet despite this we walked on until we finally reached the house.

Our grandparents were surprised by our visit, and when they realized that we were alone they were filled with worry and concern. The place was blanketed by silence, with no one there but our grandparents. I circled around the house and walked through its silent, open veranda. I studied the house's closed windows and doors, and then I went back into the room my grandparents lived in. I was confronting a situation that

was unfair by all standards--we had a house in the Jebel, but we didn't live in it and would never return to it.

My sister and I spent some time in the hospitality of our grandparents and ate some of the simple food they had. When it was time to go, our grandmother watched us leave. We hurried along the path, and our grandmother grew smaller the further we went. The house disappeared moments after we began our descent toward the foot of the mountain. When we reached the large boulder, I threw myself into its shade. I had a severe headache. My sister helped me up, and I later spent days in bed with sunstroke.

That was in the summer of 1948, the year of the nakba that led to the collapse of Palestinian society and which hampered our project of modernity. Yet I didn't realize these tragic dimensions at the time.

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I was obsessed with reaching Jerusalem without my father, and agreed with some of my classmates to visit the city on an exploratory tour. We had just finished our third year of middle school, and took with us the reading and arithmetic textbooks we were no longer in need of since another student had heard that we could sell them at half-price to a bookstore specializing in textbooks. We didn't have any money, and so set our hopes on the piasters we could gain from selling the books in order to eat and drink some of the city's treats. We entered Jerusalem from al-Mugharibeh Gate, after having walked an hour to get there.

One of my classmates promised that we wouldn't get lost, for he knew how to cross through al-Mugharibeh Gate into the city and how to return to it again on our way home. I saw the markets overflowing with people, and stared with curiosity at the people standing at the shop fronts, bargaining with the shop owners before making purchases of all kinds. Suddenly I spotted my father sitting in one of the shops and felt ashamed, for I had come to the city without his knowledge. I hurried away.

We went to several bookstores but never managed to sell any of our books. Hiding our shame, we went home, exhausted and starving, and never repeated our failure of an adventure again. Instead I made visits to the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque with my family.

Sometimes I would go with my mother. The soaring height of the Dome of the Rock would draw my eyes up to the Qur'anic verses written in delicate lettering on the walls. I would linger over the stained glass windows, there as in the al-Aqsa Mosque, where there were numerous colorful panes. As I studied this ornamentation, I would sense a kind of peace wash over me. Sometimes I would go with my father to the al-Aqsa Mosque, where I would struggle not to sleep but then eventually doze off while he was absorbed in reading the Qur'an.

I still remember some of the details of the celebrations held every April in the al-Haram al-Sharif compound. All kinds of people would crowd the compound to dance dabka and sing, and then to walk in the procession to the tomb of Moses carrying flags and banners. We would return from the city with special sweets and devour the rations

we were allowed to eat. It was delicious, and compensated us for all the delicacies we were deprived of during those years of want.

(To this day, the sight of a wretched woman at one of the year's festivities remains with me. At that time, I still didn't understand why women were mistreated. I saw her on the street leading to the al-Haram al-Sharif compound, near Suq al-Qatanin Gate. Her head was bowed and she was crying, and blood was flowing from her mouth and dripping onto the paved road. Her husband had hit her for some reason, and I was pained by the sight. He continued to threaten her as she stood folded into herself and crying. I heard my mother express her disgust with curses, and some other women intervened to protect the woman from her husband's violence. Then my mother and I continued on our way to the al-Haram al-Sharif).

In my later childhood years I also got to know the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. I would walk through its silent halls and gaze at the hung pictures of Christ painted by European artists. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher taught me how to look at the truth from various perspectives.

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My paternal grandfather became reclusive following the nakba. People say that in his youth he was intrepid, feared, and highly attached to earthly pleasures. Later in life, however, his only interest was in devoting himself to the worship of God. After I started school, my grandfather noticed that I wrote with my left hand, and he wasn't pleased with this. He got some hemp twine, shoved my hand into a cloth sack, and then tied it tightly with the twine, saying "You must be among those of the right." But I would trick him and undo the twine and write with my left hand anyway. I have remained left-handed all my life.

My grandfather would spend his time reciting the Qur'an in a loud voice, or reading another book about the tortures of hell and telling visitors about what he had learned. From time to time I would listen to snatches of his narratives. He would say that it was forbidden for women to ululate at any occasion, and that on the Day of the Resurrection that snakes would hang from their tongues. He would talk about the scorpions in hell that were the size of camels, and about terrifying snakes there that God would let loose on the infidels.

But my grandfather's tales were not the only things that frightened me, for I had previously been terrified by many other events, most significantly the ever approaching war that brought with it death, destruction, and displacement. One evening, as my father and I were eating dinner together (women couldn't sit with us to eat, although I didn't know why), a bomb suddenly exploded near our house. Its sound shocked us and we couldn't finish our dinner. We sought refuge in a windowless room on the western side of the house for fear that another bomb might go off and we could be killed.

The tales of my maternal grandmother also frightened me. She would come to stay at our house for several months each year, and was a simple and incredibly kind woman who I loved a great deal. I slept beside her at night, and she would tell me

stories and say how much she wished my mother would have many sons so that they could support me in times of misfortune. One night, when my mother was in the final month of pregnancy, my grandmother confided to me her fear that my mother might have another girl. She said she wasn't pleased about this possibility, and then fell asleep and snored loudly while I stayed up thinking about her bewildering words until I finally fell asleep too.

She would tell me and my sisters about how she once woke at daybreak in a panic, thinking that the sun was about to rise above the mountain already and angry at herself for sleeping late. She strapped onto her back the metal containers from which she sold milk in the city, but as she walked into the open countryside away from the house, realized that she had been tricked by a false dawn. At first she considered returning home, and then wavered and decided to continue on her way to the city anyway. But then misfortune forced her to turn back when she saw two hyenas running close by, striking fear in her heart. The only thing that rescued her from their onslaught were the metal containers protecting her back.

Hyenas occupied a large part of the childhood nights and nightmares of my four siblings and me. My grandmother and mother conspired to frighten us whenever we disobeyed their orders to go to bed early, telling us there was a hyena behind the door. We would fall silent, freeze our movements, and go to sleep frightened.

My grandmother constantly spoke to us of the *jinn* and about how they were all around us. She would forbid us from sprinkling water on the floor at night, for that angered the *jinn*, and she never did anything without intoning the name of God to protect her from their evil. She told us about Rasad, who lived in a well owned by one of the village's families not far from our house. She said that she had seen him out at night, made visible by the light emanating from him as though he were a lantern, as he ran freely through the streets and then disappeared.

My fear would intensify whenever Rasad began to move within a few meters of our house, as his violent mood would sometimes drive him to do. For one dawn, a relative of mine killed his young wife after fighting with her. According to the family, she was always kind and well-behaved and didn't deserve any kind of punishment. This relative had borrowed my oldest uncle's dagger because he was going to the Dead Sea to fetch salt. As his wife was baking bread for his journey, he snuck up behind her and beat her to death with it. Then he fled the village and stayed out of sight until he was arrested. He only spent a few months in prison and then was released when the British ended their mandate over the country.

That morning, morbid curiosity drove me to the hut in which the murdered woman's body lay. I peered from a distance, but didn't dare to approach too closely. I heard women talking about the blood covering her body and filling the hut, and I remained frightened for many nights. British soldiers came and conducted lengthy questioning on the crime, and didn't leave until the woman's body had been moved to its final resting place. I so pitied our dog as he pulled his tail between his legs, folded in on himself, and scurried away from the clamor of the soldiers without daring to bark. (And how pained I was when that dog later died after stray dogs bit him in a

fierce fight and left him severely injured.)

My grandfather was among those most pained by the woman's murder, for the crime had taken place near his house and he had to take care of the three children the woman left behind. He started to go frequenting to the al-Aqsa Mosque to pray. He lost interest in the radio that the Mandate authority had given him, and when it stopped working he didn't bother to fix it. Another radio didn't enter our home until many years later.

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There are many stories of tragedies and sorrow, and many tales of displaced refugees living in tents.

We could no longer go to Jerusalem by way of the High Commissioner's palace. But my young mind could only grasp a little of what I heard. Some of the teachers at our village school would digress from the usual class lessons to talk about unfamiliar topics, about what had happened and what kind of situation we had come to be in.

One evening, a car belonging to the British embassy brought a movie projector to our village. A large number of men and children gathered in the school courtyard to watch a film about the coronation of Queen Elizabeth and the role the British played in spreading modernity and civility among other peoples (so as to justify colonizing them). During the screening, older boys encouraged us to cry "Down with Britain! Long live Egypt!" We shouted this several times, and yet the film still played through to the end, and we in fact really wanted to see it. Later we found out that one of the teachers from our village had been the indirect instigator of the chanting.

My mind started to open up to new things I had never thought about before, although my specific interest in politics did not develop until later. I also went through minor hardships with my mother and father. For example, after the road passing from Hebron gate to Bethlehem was closed following the *nakba*, traffic moved in the direction of Jerusalem – Abu Dis – Wadi al-Nar – Beit Sahour – Bethlehem and reverse. (This is the same route that West Bank residents have to take today since the al-Mukabbir road and other byways have been gradually closed to them in the waves of separating Jerusalem from the West Bank that began in 1993.) It so happened that my father worked in the Bethlehem area, which meant that every Thursday afternoon I had to travel a significant distance on our white donkey to meet him. I would wait for him until sunset near the village of Abu Dis until he got off one of the Bethlehem-Jerusalem buses. Then he would get on the donkey and I would walk home behind him.

Another example is when money was short in the years following the *nakba* and employment opportunities were few and far between. These were years of scarcity, when goods were not regularly available in the markets and their prices subsequently rose. Sugar, in particular, caused us great distress. Once my maternal uncle came to visit us, and as he was leaving, my mother suggested that he linger and have a cup of tea. I enthusiastically supported her suggestion and hung onto my uncle's clothes to make him stay. He hesitated, and then my mother said with a gentleness I soon learnt was forced, "Let your uncle go."

He left with no idea of what would befall me. My mother was angry because we didn't have any sugar and I had almost put her in an embarrassing situation. I hadn't known we didn't have sugar, or perhaps my mother's sudden suggestion had simply made me forget.

Some weeks later my mother sent me to buy sugar from the distant village store, and I felt great responsibility as I returned home with it. Then the first drops of rain began to fall. I knew what would happen if the rain fell heavily--I'd return home with half of the sugar melted. I rushed, but the rain only drizzled a little and then stopped, and so luckily nothing happened to ruin that day.

Even after my father became the *mukhtar* of the clan in succession to his father, he never stopped working for the public works department whenever an opportunity to do so came up. He also grew wheat and barely on our land in the Sheikh Saad neighborhood. He and my mother harvested it, and then he threshed and winnowed it and stored it in sacks. From time to time he fell ill due to the immense energy he expended and the little care he took of himself. He would spend weeks on end in hospital, and during that time I would feel abandoned since only my mother, sisters, and little brother were at home with me. I would have a vague sense that I was responsible for them, even though I was only 12 years old.

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I became a student in one of Jerusalem's most renowned schools, the al-Rashidiya Secondary School. At the time, it was the only government school in which students could carry through to the final year. I enrolled in 1954, in the first year of middle school. I felt distinguished among my peers who had to go to the neighboring village school.

Every day I saw Jerusalem stretch beyond the walls of the old city as some of its neighborhoods were slowly built up. The Rashidiya School, which was located near al-Sahira Gate, was in a building inherited from the Ottoman period, a large, square, two-story structure with long windows ending in arches. Other buildings were constructed nearby that housed the library, the carpentry shop, and, when the student body began to grow, additional classrooms.

My knowledge of the school curriculum was good since I tended to memorize it by heart. Yet my general knowledge outside of the curriculum was rather weak. My grandfather always ordered me to read the Qur'an, and I would sit beneath the window of his room and recite it aloud, sometimes to please him and sometimes to torment him. Soon enough he would grumble and order me away. I read things that I didn't understand, and the teachers taught us the Qur'an without an appropriate interpretation that explained its meanings and ideas. I don't recall that I ever read another book outside of the school curriculum until I was in my first year of high school.

Once, when I was still a student in the village school, our teacher gave us stories illustrated with color pictures. We joyously snatched them up and devoured them. My story was about a person called al-Arandas, who got a fish stuck in his throat while he was eating. One of his friends gave him a hard knock on the back and the

fish popped out, saving him from choking to death. Then the teacher collected all the books from us, and this wonderful occurrence was never repeated again.

When I was young, my father never told me about his own hardship and concerns, and yet he did me a real service by taking me with him to the work stations set up to forge roads between the cities and villages. I met all kinds of people at them and listened to many stories and tales. One time I went with him to a small village in the Hebron area where the fertile land was full of vineyards and figs. A woman from the village went out one morning to collect kindling from the valley, and there she met a shepherd, either through an arranged meeting or by coincidence. They withdrew into seclusion together, but by chance someone saw them and the woman was forced to fidget beneath him and to cry out, giving the impression that she was being raped. Everyone was talking about her at the time, and the incident shocked me. Years later, I used it as material when I wrote the story *ahl al-balad* (The villagers).

I also went with my father to the village of Artas near Bethlehem. There was a monastery there at the foot of the mountain that granted the village special prestige. It was served by a number of monks and nuns, and it had a spring there that the villagers drank from. Young girls would go there carrying jugs on their heads to fill with water, and the sight of them in their embroidered peasant dresses filled me with joy. I often watched them eagerly, wishing that one of them would dare to look at me and see the longing in my eyes. The village was extremely conservative and girls didn't have many opportunities to express feelings that might lead to romantic relationships that may or may not end in marriage.

I didn't acquire any particularly trustworthy knowledge from the men who worked with my father, for they typically had only completed a few years of schooling. Yet they would often embarrass me with their knowledge that seemed superior to mine. Some of them would try to show off what they knew, surprising me with questions I couldn't answer and shaming me before my father, who thought I was extremely clever and that I remembered everything.

Within the family, my mother and my grandmother Mariam often told us folk tales before we went to bed. These tales were our only cultural intake. No newspapers ever entered our house, and neither did another radio after my grandfather's broke. Instead, my grandmother and mother pulled me into the world of folk tales. And whenever I accompanied my father to the work stations, I made sure to return with new stories I'd heard the workers to tell to my father and their workmates in the evenings.

One of my maternal uncles excelled at telling stories. Yet he also went further than that, for he told my mother all of his personal concerns, just like my other maternal uncles did. She was their only sister, and following the death of my grandmother she played the role of mother to them. But this particular uncle went even beyond that, telling my mother about his adventures with women in distant villages, sometimes in a whisper and at other times in a loud voice. I was puzzled by the tales he would shamelessly tell her, and later found that women of all kinds and in all situations formed a primary focus of my own story writing.

My mother would add to the folk tales stories taken from her own experience. Once

she told us about a mad woman she had come across in Wadi al-Dimas. She had seen the woman from a distance sitting in the valley with her hair hanging loose, and so she'd joined a group of men and women from al-Abidiya village returning home from Jerusalem. She walked with them until they passed the woman, who kept staring at her in particular as though she wanted to pounce on her. The only thing that protected her was being part of a large group of people.

When they approached al-Harathan, the people turned off towards al-Abidiya and my mother left them because she was going to al-Bariya to visit her father. They advised her to walk quickly so that she wouldn't be followed by that woman, who had lost her mind when her brother had been killed in 1948. And so my mother hurried along. I would curl up in my bed, frightened by the thought of what could happen in a chance encounter with that woman or others like her.

My mother often spoke to us of the bitter suffering she'd undergone in the years after she'd left al-Bariya and gone to live in our new house in Jebel al-Mukabbir. At that time, ten years before the *nakba*, the Jebel still didn't have many houses. A tall, lean woman would appear near our house every dawn, her tense height rearing up like a restive horse. She'd angrily yell at the house's occupants because they were still asleep, and shout at them to wake up. Once she had fulfilled this mission she'd disappear, and no one ever knew why she insisted on doing this.

Back in those days, my siblings and I would gradually acquire my mother's fears. She would tell us about the vague mumblings of men she heard during the late hours of the night coming from a large cave only a few dozen meters from our house. Reality mixed with fancy in my mother's mind.

My grandmother Hilweh also frightened me from time to time, for she specialized in treating the family's children with fire branding whenever they had stomach aches or diarrhea. Typically the terrifying scenario would begin with catching me once I had complained of a stomach ache. My grandmother, mother, and oldest sister would cooperate to get a hold of me, and then my grandmother would take the large needle that my mother used to sew up burlap sacks of wheat and barley and place it in the flame of the gas stove. She would leave it there until its head glowed red, and then she would raise it and bring it down on my stomach, causing a pop and giving off the smell of burnt flesh. Then she would put it back into the flame while I screamed and twisted in agony, unable to escape the strong grip of my mother and sister until after my grandmother had duly finished her job. Then I would get up, furious, and leave the house to collect stones I would throw at her. She would avoid them and laugh softly through to the end of her stay.

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I had never thought about going to the cinema due to the counsel of my family, who described it as a waste of time. But one night and without prior planning, I went to al-Hamra Cinema to see a film of Senuhi al-Masri. (I later read about his life in Mustafa Murad al-Debagh's book, and learnt that he had come to Palestine as a political refugee in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (before Christ), fleeing a new Pharaoh. He lived

in Palestine for several years and married a Palestinian girl and later returned to Egypt after the Pharaoh allowed him to do so.) Following this initial experience, the cinema became a source of learning and great pleasure for me.

Sometimes, during the school lunch break I would go to the al-Musrara quarter and hire a bicycle with savings from my allowance. After numerous attempts I learned how to ride bicycles, and considered this a real advantage to studying in the city. I showed off to my peers who went to middle school in the neighboring village of Sour Baher.

Sometimes I would have lunch in my uncle's shop. I would buy a piece of halva and a loaf of bread from a nearby store and then sit at the shop's door or in Mona Cafe, just opposite my uncle's shop, and watch the people passing through the market. Then I would return to school and pass the time remaining until we could go home.

The city's markets became familiar to me, and sometimes my mother would entrust me with buying things for the house. She would scold me when she found a damaged tomato or a withered sweet potato, and urged me to look carefully when buying vegetables. She couldn't be convinced that merchants wouldn't let a boy my age pick out his purchases on his own.

Yet I did not suffice with these ventures, and from time to time I went to the Dome of the Rock and al-Haram al-Sharif. Sometimes I would pray the noon prayer and then study as I walked to and fro through one of the courtyards. I would return to school via al-Mi'dhana al-Hamra Street, which led to al-Sahira Gate, or via al-Wad Road leading to al-Amud Gate. I learned the names of the markets, alleys, shops, restaurants, and cafes, and when I would return to the village, I'd talk about the city.

In the mid-1950s, my generation was influenced by the nationalist uprising against Western colonialism and its allies. We began to pay attention to the role played by Egypt in this regard following the July 1952 revolution.

The political developments that swept the region led my father to think about buying a radio. I went with him to a store in the Khan al-Zeit Gate area, and we bought a radio that ran on dry batteries. It had several buttons and a glass panel filled with numbers and needles that indicated the radio stations. It also had a glass knob that lit up when you pressed the power button, and so we thought it was incomparably superior to my grandfather's old radio. My father started to spend the evenings following the news. Cairo, and then the Voice of the Arabs, were the most important stations he listened to. Whenever I had the opportunity, I would sit next to the radio to listen to the singers of those days, such as Muhamamd Abdel Wahab, Farid al-Atrash, and Abdel Halim Hafiz.

When the tripartite forces attacked Egypt, the patriotic songs of Fayda Kamel and others drew my attention most. I would get highly worked up when I heard the song, "God is mightier than the tricks of the aggressors," the anthem "My country, my country," or the song "Peace has returned, oh Nile," which filled our ears after the war ended.

I started to follow Egypt's news and was enthusiastic about the activities of President Gamal Abdel Nasser. When the Suez Canal was nationalized, I was gripped

by the zeal that filled everyone's hearts. When the tripartite forces attacked Egypt starting with Israel's invasion of Sinai on 29 October 1956, my heart was with Egypt just as everyone else's was. I followed the news of fighting on the front and of the popular resistance in the Canal Zone cities.

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I often sat in Uncle Ayed's shop waiting for the right moment to head to the gate of Schmidt College. Lucy would walk through in a throng of girls, and I would watch on from the opposite sidewalk. Then the girls would break up into a few groups and disperse in every direction. Lucy and her friends would walk toward the taxi station near al-Amud Gate, go down the few steps, and then cross through the massive entrance to the old city. A few friends and I would follow them, sometimes walking across from them at a distance and sometimes approaching them. Their procession would continue to Khan al-Zeit Gate market, where we'd get closer to them using the crowdedness of the market as a pretext. They'd try to avoid our wary brushes without acknowledging us, and their laughter and graceful movements would fill us with suppressed joy. We would only distance ourselves from them again once we'd reached the beginning of al-Khanqa al-Salahiya Street, which leads to the Christian quarter.

The crowds thinned out there and the groups of girls would began to disperse. One girl would disappear into an alley, and then another would take a different back street toward her house. Only Lucy and a few of the other girls would remain to cross Haret al-Nasara market. They'd climb a few stairs at the end of the market, at the intersection with the bazaar, and walk towards the Armenian quarter, where they'd split up and head to their homes. I'd climb the stairs and take a few steps along the narrow, deserted Mar Morcos Street and then return, filled with desire for Lucy to pay attention to me, maybe by exchanging glances or even returning the feelings I had for her. Yet I never noticed any change in her behavior; she always remained indifferent despite the numerous times I followed her from the school gate practically to her house. At last I despondently let go of her, convinced of my defeat.

That took place when I was a young teenager in middle school. I never would have thought about chasing girls if it hadn't been for my relative who studied with me in the al-Rashidiya School. He was two years ahead of me, and opened my eyes to the matter while he was chasing a girl from Schmidt College. Just like with my girl, he had no success in swaying his. It seems that he wanted to compensate for that, for he told me about romantic adventures with other girls that he and his friends who were older than me had experienced at celebrations in the city. To this day, I still don't know how much truth there was to his stories.

I didn't see Lucy in later years; it seems that she finished her schooling and left for somewhere else. Then in my final year of school I got involved in a quiet love story. It was with a girl from my village, a girl I had seen when I was ten or eleven. We boys and girls would gather in an open area and tease her, sometimes with shocking words, until she cursed and threw stones at us in her fury. Then she would run off with all of the other girls. This scene was repeated many times, and was later followed by

encounters at weddings that took the form of an innocent pursuit she never avoided, although she always remained somewhat shy. I found an odd pleasure in this. But soon enough I was cut off from her and then forgot about her, and she must have forgotten about me too. It was simply one of my first romantic attempts to approach the world of girls. They were innocent, naïve, and shy attempts.

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As for Ramallah, the first time I went there I was 16.

We spilled out of the bus arriving from Jerusalem at the final station near Dunya Cinema, which shut down when the first *Intifada* broke out as though cinemas and the *Intifada* were incompatible. Its owners demolished it a year ago and opened a car park in the empty lot created--another abuse of the city's architectural heritage and attack on memories of the city.

From the Dunya Cinema that no longer exists, we would continue on foot. Or rather, I would continue on foot, as would my worker cousins who accompanied my father. My father, however, had created a rather comfortable custom for himself. A worker from the village we were going to, would be waiting for us with a saddled donkey, which my father would ride while we followed on foot behind him.

We went to Ain Arik village, which was not far from Ramallah but which cars couldn't reach. It was my father's mission to make the village accessible by car; he supervised the forging of a road connecting the village and the city during the summer of 1957. I was still in school, and my father had been taking me during summer vacations to work with these projects for a few dinars each month.

We rented a house in the village to stay in all summer long. It was the first time that my father didn't stay in a tent like he had at all the other work stations. This particular house was nothing more than a large room with long windows that let in the refreshing night summer breeze. I would sleep in great comfort, and visions of the girls I would pass in the village's alleyways and gardens would often visit me in my dreams. I sensed that my life was opening up to new directions, and the Ramallah countryside was in some way or another at least partly responsible for that.

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The following summer I got even closer to Ramallah. My father set up his tent and work station in al-Tira, on the site where Dar al-Mu'alimat now stands and near the road my father was working on to connect Ain Qiniya village to Ramallah. He was no longer in need of a donkey to pick him up near Dunya Cinema at the start of each week, for the site was nearby and could be reached on foot in a matter of minutes.

My father had a metal bed that he took with him everywhere as he traveled from one village to the next forging roads. The value of this bed became apparent in al-Tira. Every night I would spread blankets on the dirt floor of the tent and then look all around before putting out the soft light of the lantern. I had to do this for the sake of safety, for my personal safety that is. My father's assistant would lie upon his blankets across from me and do the same thing for the sake of his own personal safety. Even

my father, lying up high in his bed conducted the same surveillance. Luckily our enemy targets were easy to spot.

We'd grab our shoes and use their heels to strike at the scorpions crawling everywhere, taking pleasure in crushing them. Then we'd sit and wait until other scorpions appeared out of the red soil, and I'd long for the spacious room with long windows in Ain Arik. Yet sleep would come in the end, for we simply couldn't stay up all night long waiting for scorpions to appear in order to kill them before they bit us. My father's assistant would recite the Verse of the Chair in a loud voice as though doing so would protect us all from the threat of the scorpions. I'm sure my father recited it as well without us hearing him, as one night there was a scorpion on the tent roof right above his head. I hadn't memorized the verse of the chair, and so I'd recite the Chapter of Daybreak three times in a row before I went to sleep.

It was from this rural location in al-Tira that I began to form a plan to invade Ramallah with all of its intriguing secrets. (At the time, I hadn't yet read the plans of Mao Zedong to invade the city from the countryside.) I formed the plan on my own without my father's knowledge, as he would have considered it an unnecessary luxury. Yet my desire to invade the city wasn't random and unplanned.

I had grown accustomed to seeing throngs of young women and girls, a little older than me or more or less around my age, walking down the dirt path from Ramallah in the afternoons. They would be wearing city clothes that revealed their shapely legs and comely arms. The radiant sight of them would light up my imagination, and I grew convinced that Ramallah was filled with wives, for it was sending these throngs of young girls to the vineyards in the lazy, late afternoon for me, for *me!* Stationing myself on the corner became one of my daily missions. I would observe the girls close up, taking pleasure in their beauty and listening to their pretty speech punctuated with delicate laughter.

It never crossed my mind to follow them to the vineyards and fig orchards in the valley, for that would ruin my plan by making my father realize there was a crack in the wall he'd built around me. To avoid questioning about my stationing on the corner, I'd take with me a novel by Muhammad Abdel Halim Abdullah. I loved reading him at the time, and I'd take with me "After Sunset" or "The Tree." My father was always glad to see me reading any book, just as long as I was reading. In his mind, all books were related to school, and it was school that would grant me the diploma that would get me a civil service job and enable me to help him with the costs of the large family. The novels of Muhammad Abdel Halim Abdullah, with all of their fanciful romance, filled me with fervent emotion and a desire to be like the civil servants who were their heroes. Like them, I wanted to rent a house in the city, and for circumstances to lead me to fall in love with the woman awaiting my arrival.

I longed to go to Ramallah and walk through its streets and quarters. Perhaps a tall, slender, beautiful girl was awaiting me there, waiting for us to fall in love with each other. Muhammad Abdel Halim Abdullah was largely responsible for this dream, but the opportunity to fulfill it arrived thanks to my cousins who worked with my father. They were the first to suggest that we go to Ramallah to hire bicycles. And so I went

for that reason, since there were others besides me who had made plans to invade the city.

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And thus I made it into Ramallah and tried to familiarize myself with it first hand. By getting to know the city, my self confidence grew, and I sensed that many surprises were awaiting me in life. I don't know where my father learnt the saying, "Whoever is serious gets what he wants." Of course by this he didn't mean riding bicycles through the city streets; he meant constantly studying my schoolbooks and never letting my attention shift to anything else. But I reinterpreted my father's saying to suit my own tastes without ever discussing it with him, for he wouldn't put up with discussions.

There were cars of all shapes and colors coming and going through the streets of Ramallah. From time to time they would honk, blaring for no apparent reason. That might have been annoying for those seeking perfect calm, but I considered it one of the city's many advantages over the village. It didn't cause me any annoyance; on the contrary, in the past I had loved to slip into a stopped car and press the horn, right in the center of the steering wheel, and make it issue that loud, melodic sound.

Men and women walked along Ramallah's sidewalks. There were women of the same kind I had seen going to the vineyards, women in traditional clothing, and old women being guided along the sidewalks or appearing at windows and the doors of houses. Then there were girls of the kind I longed for, standing coquettishly at balcony railings. I tried to send burning glances like those of the heroes in the novels I read, but mine didn't receive any responses. I would walk through the city streets with my cousins, who turned all about themselves just as I did.

The city had its own special magic, one that spread slowly into my heart and saturated my senses. It wasn't crowded, and that granted me a sense of familiarity from the very start. It was a small city with no complications or disturbances, seeming to have sufficed with its men and women and those who came from the neighboring villages to work and shop or sell, or just to enjoy a visit and an outing to its restaurants and cafes.

We combed Ramallah for a shop that hired bicycles and I focused all my attention on riding through the city streets. I sensed that that would satisfy me, bringing me sufficient pleasure and fulfillment during my initial forays into the city. My obsession with riding a bicycle even made me temporarily forget the idea of trying to be like the heroes of Muhammad Abdel Halim Abdullah. Or perhaps I felt that having my cousins with me would limit the possibilities of getting to know a girl I could fall in love with. And maybe I also realized the need for other requirements like those possessed by Abdel Halim Abdullah's heroes—a secure job, a house rented in a well populated neighborhood, and an appropriate age that would allow for the possibilities of love and marriage on the one hand, or, on the other, a crisis of confidence with one's sweetheart and the subsequent destruction of love. So, there were requirements then! I was inexperienced, and my heart still bore the pain of failure caused by that girl in Jerusalem. And so I turned, with all my wounds, to riding bicycles instead.

We crossed al-Mughtaribin Square and walked a little along the street that led to the Ramallah Secondary School, where we found the store we were looking for. We saw the bicycles lined up against the store's walls, and each of us four cousins hired one. Then we drove through the city streets, especially the ones that didn't have much traffic. We drove along the street leading to the high school, a beautiful street lined with trees. City residents strolled along it, especially the intellectual elite in their distinctive, modern dress that signified wealth.

The first time, we drove the bicycles with care and rarely distanced ourselves from each other. On subsequent occasions we drove more fearlessly through the city streets. We'd enter al-Mughtaribin Square and head towards al-Manara Square, and drive down al-Irsal Street which was also lined with trees, almost all of which are now gone. We'd circle the street and return to al-Manara Square, and then go down the main street leading to Dunya Cinema. We'd almost reach the dirt road leading to al-Tira, and then return again to Dunya Cinema and then al-Mughtaribin Square and from there to the street that led to Beitunia village. We'd cross the street lined with red tile-roofed buildings that had fenced gardens. We'd stay on our bicycles until the edge of the village and then return to the city center and take the bicycles back to the shop owner once our time was up. Then we'd go back to my father's work station in such a good mood that nothing could spoil it except for the roar of planes flying east over Ramallah.

Then the revolution in Iraq took place. That's what the radios said, but we didn't have a radio in the tent. During the day my father would sit under the shade of a tree and watch the workers slave under the searing heat of the sun. He'd ask passing villagers for the latest news and in the evening, everyone would gather at his tent entrance and listen to him comment on the news he'd heard, all of it hopeful. After that we'd listen to tales of women as told by my father's assistant, who loved women and spoke about them whenever he could. My father seemed to harbor reservations about this kind of talk, probably in fear for my impressionable young mind, but he never tried to silence him for he probably wanted to listen.

The planes, as the radio said, belonged to the British air force and were heading to Jordan to protect the powers there from any agitation like that which had taken place in Iraq. (Many years later, other planes would fly in Ramallah's skies and empty their missiles upon the headquarters of the Palestinian National Authority, during the al-Aqsa *Intifada*. The helicopters looked like the scorpions we used to crush with the heels of our shoes, and they terrified the children of Ramallah and other cities.)

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To me, Ramallah is the city of late childhood, one of dreams and wishes.

*Translated by Jennifer Leigh Peterson.*

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