

# The Exiling of Sheikh Jarrah

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## Sheikh Jarrah

For more than twenty years I've lived on a small stretch of the Nablus Road in Sheikh Jarrah, making the neighborhood my most constant home. I moved in a penniless graduate student in the late 1980s and found an apartment in a nondescript mid-century building that I shared with a series of grad students and solidarity workers who were as poorly dressed and penniless as I was. Recklessly, I had chosen Gaza as a place to do my fieldwork in anthropology, a year after it had exploded in the first uprising's fog of tear gas and black tire smoke. The only way I could make it through a week of Gaza's heavy mix of intifada violence and social repression was by knowing that on my horizon were a few days in the little apartment on the Nablus Road where I could grab some oxygen, a few sips of Gold Star beer and remember what it was like to have bare arms. Sheikh Jarrah was a haven, but a rather odd one.

## 1989

A neighborhood of Arab East Jerusalem, Sheikh Jarrah ambles over two hills cut in the middle by a *wadi* with its three main quarters determined by this topography. The quarter on its southern hill is home to the American Colony Hotel and the mosque and tomb of the eponymous Sheikh Jarrah. In the *wadi* is the mythical tomb of Simon the Just (actually the resting place of Julia Sabine, a Roman woman) and the now infamous settler takeovers of Palestinian refugee family homes. My quarter, on the northern hill (sometimes called "upper Sheikh Jarrah"), is home to turn-of-the-century



Karm al Mufti-Aerial view from the 1930s. *Source: Matson Collection Library of Congress.*

family mansions that mirror those lost to Israel when it took the western part of the city in 1948, as well as to a handful of foreign consulates that survived Israel's arrival on this side of town in 1967.

When I arrived, the upper quarter still had an aura of gentility that Palestinians of a certain generation continue to associate with the whole neighborhood. Up the road were two grand missionary-style hospitals: The French Hospital and the more famous St. John's Ophthalmic Hospital to whose doors I regularly delivered Hajjis from Gaza losing their sight to diabetes and years of hypertension. There was also the closest thing to a high-rise building in East Jerusalem, the Ambassador Hotel, whose coral-colored dining room held the only childhood memories that connected me to the neighborhood.

And there were three schools: the Mamuniyya Girls School (that Jerusalemites still called by its pre-'67 name, the Sakakini); the New Rowda Girls School (still

“new” although established in 1948) and the British School of Archaeology (not actually a center of learning, but more a “school” of thought). Weaving it all together was the Nablus Road, the bustling main commuter artery in the West Bank that carried passengers back and forth through the neighborhoods on their way between Jerusalem’s Damascus Gate and anywhere they needed to go as far as Jenin and back. Bordering its western edge was a long strip of wasteland, the symbolic remains of “no man’s land” that created a narrow but comforting separation from the inexorable spread of our unwanted West Jerusalem neighbor-occupiers.

But despite all its grand offerings and traffic the neighborhood was sleepy. Or, more exactly, it was in a paralysis that began when Israel stopped the clock in 1967. New buildings were totally absent. Looking around, you could make out an odd assortment of weathered concrete skeletons protruding from buildings: unfinished projects that had waited despondently for twenty years for an elusive Israeli building permit. My apartment was surrounded by the largest such frozen project – the rubble of a huge chunk of hill everyone referred to as “the cemetery” that my landlord’s father had scraped out for a planned hotel just before Israel arrived. Only later did I learn the real source of the nickname: after years of battling in the courts, the father had been struck by a fatal heart attack the moment he learnt the Israeli municipality had condemned his dream hotel to remain a permanent pile of rubble.

Most of the residents of the quarter were also surviving remnants of a more genteel past. My immediate neighbors were assorted versions of Palestinian Miss Havishams: spinsters and widows from Jerusalem’s “good” families who had been left behind when other family members died-off or moved on to more promising futures. Alone in their grand family homes, they busied themselves by spying on the limited action offered by the street and oppressing the various helpers tasked with assisting them in the upkeep of the family shrine. And, like any good shrine, their homes were thick with icons and offerings. Each interior like an over-stocked souvenir shop, sagging with generations of knick-knacks, fading color photos of successful family members at the Eiffel Tower or Disney World and masses of heavy furniture served up with generous dollops of lace doilies. It struck me that as long as these old ladies rattled around these over-stuffed rooms wielding their feather dusters and frying garlic for today’s lunch, family members at the far corners of the universe could live in the certainty that their ancestral city was still a breathing part of their being.

Above me lived Mary – in her 80s, with red-hennaed hair and the smoking habits of Colette. She had spent most of her adult life working at the French Consulate, and in retirement now hosted a steady stream of visitors from across the West Bank seeking her clairvoyant readings of their coffee grounds. Next door was “Midget Lady” and her tall humorless sister. Midget Lady was a streak of lightning: always out on the front verandah, looking for company, waving at passers-by and offering home-made *ma‘moul* cookies to strangers and workmen. Because of this wanton behavior, fairly credible rumors had gone around the neighborhood that she was having an affair with a bus driver who plied the route in front of her house. Next to them was Sitt Usra, a retired UNRWA school teacher, and her slightly retarded brother. She was

young and spry at around sixty-five; he was slow and old at fifty. You could walk the whole length of the road and not find a nuclear family and definitely not come upon a neighborhood child. In fact, the only men or children around were outsiders who came to the quarter a few hours a day for two of its main services: refreshment and education.

There is still only one little corner store on my stretch of road, run by Abu Ramon, originally from Rafidia outside Nablus. His unmarked shop half-heartedly offered the usual basics of cheap detergent and canned goods. But the pretense at being a regular grocer was so transparent that the sardines and soap could only have been a gesture to the neighborhood. The shop was actually a liquor store – a specialty liquor store that catered to furtive drinking from brown paper bags on the sidewalk. It was not the place you went to for quality or quantity. Abu Ramon's best were airplane-size bottles of Johnny Walker Red, but his main sellers were half bottles of cheap local brandy and arak that stood in regimented rows under the protection of a small poster of St. George slaying the dragon. Luckily, given these specialties, the small skid row this begat on the pavement was composed mainly of old men from down in the *wadi* who tended to be morose, silent drinkers. Down the way at "Mr. Automatic" cold beer had attracted a more muscular crowd of Palestinian workers coming back from Israel, who sometimes got into brawls in between relieving themselves against the wall of the New Rowda School. That upper Sheikh Jarrah was the only place outside the Old City's Christian quarter where you could buy booze in East Jerusalem wasn't a sign of liberalism but of aloofness compensating for lack of backbone. Once the sons of the quarter had disappeared into exile, the only protection left for the remaining residents was to close their shutters and feign indifference to illicit goings-on at their doorstep.

As I was weeding my patch of front garden one day, a nervous young man with the telltale signs of stone dust on his shirt ran down the steps from the street. Wordlessly he leaned forward and thrust a balled-up keffiyah into my hands before walking off. The ethic of the First Intifada was so powerful that I immediately knew what to do and hid it in the house, just in time to see an army patrol pass by my front window.

The city was galvanized. Trips downtown regularly involved skirting around stone barricades and lit tires. The main militants in our neighborhood were the schoolgirls from the New Rowda down in the *wadi*, who regularly blocked the main road with the garbage dumpster and broke into choruses of nationalist chants. Walking to town one day, passing through their sea of blue uniforms, I suddenly saw the soldiers plunk one of the girls into the back of their jeep. She was a tiny thing, perhaps eight or nine, in a pea-green home-knit jumper and was crying hysterically. I looked around, hoping to find a teacher or just about any capable adult to take on the duty at hand. But it was no use. I sucked in my breath and marched up to the middle-aged soldier wanly picking his teeth in the front of the jeep, putting on my best Miss Jean Brodie imitation:

"Excuse me, excuse me, can't you see she's just a frightened little girl?"

He found another piece of breakfast behind his tonsils and ignored me.

Then I tried, "Listen you look like you have children."

That got his attention and he looked at me expectantly.

I continued, “Don’t you have a little girl? You certainly look like you do.”

And he slaughtered me: “Yes, I have a little girl but she doesn’t throw stones.”

I spent the better part of a week mumbling to myself endless variations of the correct reply that might have demolished his sick logic and freed the terrified little girl.

But, for the most part, inactivity was our quarter’s main contribution to the uprising; strict observance of the infinite rounds of general strikes suited its tendency for somnolence. This suited me too. Gaza was my intifada, and I came home to Sheikh Jarrah for a breather. In fact, half of Gaza also came to my home for a breather, and my quiet apartment on Nablus Road became filled with the company of friends and their children seeking a few days of the quarter’s healing kindness.

## 1992

Just after the first Gulf war I graduated to a modest family mansion just a few houses down the road, where I still live with my husband, Alex. Once home to a family of five (and – given the servant bells wired into every room – at least one maid), it had been inhabited by one of the quarter’s lonely Miss Havishams who had recently passed away. Her only son, working in Abu Dhabi, had inherited the place and wanted to get it rented cheaply and quickly. Alex and I found ourselves trying to cram our modest pile of belongings into a full-fledged family shrine. There was only one thing to do – gut the place.

Although they lived in million-dollar real estate, the surviving Miss Havishams were, to put it kindly, a thrifty lot. Each time I carried yet another forty-year collection of useful jam jars out to the neighborhood tip, I’d find one of them unapologetically sifting through my last haul. I’ll never forget the sight of Midget Lady pulling an orange plastic urn (traditionally used for washing bums in lieu of loo paper) out of the bowels of the tip and waving it triumphantly over her head. Once the dusty contents of the entire house had made their way out our front door and slowly worked their way back into the corners and crevices of our neighbors’ homes, we were finally ready to celebrate.

It was New Year’s Eve and no one had been to a party in years. The downside of the First Intifada was that, despite having a sense of humor, it had no sense of fun: parties, music and dancing were all banned out of respect for the suffering. Even if the principle is fine, the fact is that Palestine’s intifadas tend to be endless. And given that we were in the only neighborhood where masked youth bearing axes were unlikely to show up during the third playing of *I Will Survive* (Palestine’s favorite disco anthem), throwing a party actually felt like a national duty. I invited friends from everywhere and then got worried the gathering might be too small – so told them to bring anyone they knew. People I’d known for years, people whom I still don’t know, husbands just released from prison in Gaza, wild women from Nablus, all of Ramallah and god knows from where else – all showed up. Just before midnight, when we turned

down the music to wait for the big moment, the doorbell rang suddenly. Everyone froze and looked anxiously towards the door. I opened it gingerly, trying to think of what to say to the police or masked men or, hopefully, the indignant sheikh that I was about to face, when I was greeted with, “Buona sera, c’è un disco qui?” A group of desperate Italian tourists in search of New Year’s Eve were hoping they’d finally found a discotheque. “Yes, yes – come in! No, don’t worry, it’s free.” To this day, I am accosted by strangers who tell me they once attended a wonderful party at my house – always with the wistful conclusion, “When we could still get to Jerusalem”.

On one side of our house was a deserted plot of land with olive trees and a single black cypress that stood next to an opening in a low stone wall. Beyond it was a massive eucalyptus tree blocking the view of the next house, a lovely old mansion surrounded by a huge garden. The whole pastoral vista on this side of the house was marred only by the occasional barking of a team of German Shepherds followed by shouts in Hebrew telling them to shut up. The empty lot had been the front garden of the Saudi Embassy until 1967; to the back stood the building, now surrounded by a high metal fence and guarded by the noisy dogs. The Israelis had confiscated it as “enemy property” and turned it into a listening station to keep tabs on the consulates in the neighborhood, but had left the front garden to fend for itself, probably in an attempt to keep a low profile. You only glimpsed the building’s inhabitants twice a day when they tore in and out of their driveway at breakneck speed, just across from Abu Ramon’s shop. This behavior always brought forth chuckles from Abu Ramon. “What do they think? If they go fast we won’t know they’re here?” What made the joke even better was his and everybody else’s conviction that our keystone cops were from the Mossad. “They don’t let just anyone do this work you know, it’s international work spying on the consulates,” I was told by Sitt Usra who seemed to think that only Israel’s elite agents were good enough for the neighborhood.

The idea of the Mossad trying to avert detection by our motley crew was hilarious, but what made it a farce was that they had taken up residence in the only quarter in the whole city that was resolutely blind.

One day I finally caught the lemon thief who’d stripped the fruit off the tree whose branches dipped over our wall into the empty lot. From the window, I saw hands grasping at the remaining lemons. Marching outside, I called a terse hello and got back a cheery rejoinder as the hands continued grabbing at the fruit. I was incensed. “Hello, can I help you?” I tried sarcastically. “No thanks, I can reach them from here.” My diplomatic skills exhausted, I leaned over the wall and said, “Would you please stop taking our lemons?” Without a blink, the gangly middle-aged man grabbed another two and said, “*Khalas*, that’ll be enough.” He walked over and introduced himself as Adel, our neighbor from the house across the empty lot. He wasn’t the owner, but a live-in guard hired to keep a presence in the house by the owners who’d all lost their right to Jerusalem residency. Unmarried and with the un-kempt look of ageing bachelors, he made sure to tell me that he came from an illustrious family and worked (also as a guard) for Feisal Hussein, the notable Jerusalem nationalist leader, before bumming a cigarette off me and hauling away half our lemons. Whenever I was in

the garden, I could expect him to show up, discuss the latest political situation and cadge whatever was available: a bent trowel, a beer or a few seeds of whatever I was planting. One day he asked for another of the flower seedlings I'd given him.

"You mean the tobacco plant?"

He gave me a sly grin. "If that's what you want to call it. I dried some of the leaves and smoked it – boy, did my head spin!"

In the spring, when the lot was overgrown with wild wheat, two old women from the Shuafat refugee camp would come and harvest it by hand to feed the sheep they kept at home. In the autumn, landless peasant women from the village of Kharbatha appeared to harvest the olives. Whenever the gleaners came the Mossad's dogs would bark for the first few minutes from behind their caged enclosure and then they too would be quieted by the unfolding pastoral scene.

## 1993

Silence was over. The return of weddings to the two hotels in the quarter signalled that the Intifada had finally crossed the invisible line that separates petering-out from reaching a conclusion. At the Ambassador Hotel well-heeled crowds showed up in shiny private cars to fete the happy couple to the deafening beat of Arabic pop. Across the way at its more modest sister, the Mount Scopus, West Bank buses delivered busloads of villagers to do the same, but to deafening choruses of syncopated Palestinian folk music. Either way the outcome for us was the same: every night we'd curse the happy couple as the house shuddered between the competing waves of dissonant sound systems. The Intifada may have been long and cruel, but at least it had been quiet.

But, in retrospect, the augury of the change to come was when the Israelis finally breached no man's land and built a fortress-like Border Police station just a stone's throw away from the Ambassador Hotel. By then I had so fully absorbed the neighborhood's ethic that I simply ignored it whenever I drove by. Then bulldozers arrived and started ripping up the stretches of field I had surreptitiously walked across on strike-days to buy cigarettes from the enemy. Within no time the bulldozers had gouged a road the Israelis crowned "Highway One," right down the spine of no man's land. I kept using the old turn-off into our neighborhood, studiously eluding the new master of all roads. Then they blocked the old turn-off and I was forced to take Highway One. Soon enough it was announced that we had a peace process and they proceeded to make our main road, the Nablus Road, a one-way street.

## 1994

Ask anyone who lived through the early peace process years and they will tell you it was like being sent blindfolded onto a roller-coaster. After years of strike-day-imposed

relaxation we were suddenly plunged into relentless activity that left no time to contemplate the direction we were being hurled towards. I kept my head down, finally finished my dissertation and got a job at Birzeit University. My long drives to Gaza were now replaced with a shorter commute where every day I could see the confusing signs of the times whizzing by. One day I'd be in Ramallah cheering as the last Israeli soldiers retreated, under a hail of stones, from the main police station; then, driving home, I'd notice another hilltop being scraped away next to one of the settlements, readying it for "natural growth." Our "terrorists" suddenly became policemen and cavorted with the Israeli soldiers in joint patrols. The temporary checkpoint Israel set up on the way into Jerusalem was starting to look permanent, but there were Arafat and Rabin shaking hands on television. Nothing was comprehensible but there was no time to think about it – unless you were a denizen of our quarter. Abu Ramon was the first naysayer: "*Khalas*, they sold us out. Those guys from Tunis – a bunch of thieves," as he read the details of the agreement in *al Quds*. Sitt Usra went even further and, only weeks into the peace process raised the first-ever legal case against the fledgling Palestinian Authority when she discovered their policemen lodging at her winter home in Jericho in the absence of barracks. This made them vandals and thieves. Having lived through the nastiness of Gaza's long slide into internal violence, I was more sanguine: the peace process was risky, full of holes, but was still a work in progress.

But while Gaza and Ramallah were charging through the dizzying changes that constituted "state building," Sheikh Jarrah, along with the rest of East Jerusalem, had been left as an afterthought in the peace agreement. Even worse, Israel had dumped us, along with settlements and refugees, into the "off-limits" bin of the negotiations. While never the center of militant action, East Jerusalem – as the only venue in the occupied territories where Israel allowed public gatherings – had long been the center of political activity. We'd always had a constant stream of visitors from across the West Bank and Gaza stopping by after attending a conference at the National Palace Hotel or the endless calendar of women's, prisoners', or children's day events at the Hakawati National Theatre. Everything in Jerusalem had been classed as "national" as opposed to the rest of the country where nothing rated above local. But now we found ourselves being demoted by these upstart backwaters where "the peace" was happening. In Jerusalem, even the Occupation was slowly turning into a local event.

Still, at first we got a few morsels. Work commenced down in the *wadi* on foundations for two new hotels – the first Palestinian building projects allowed in the neighborhood in nearly thirty years. Up the street, a new research center on Jerusalem moved in, which gave me the chance to enjoy lunches with friends from Ramallah who were staffing it at the slew of restaurants that suddenly opened up just down the road from Mr. Automatic. And, after years of claiming I was going to the American Colony Hotel so as to cajole terrified Israeli taxi drivers into entering our dangerous neighborhood, I could now announce my true destination, get dropped at my doorstep and even get a hearty "Shalom" thrown in. One day as I walked into Abu Ramon's, I found Israelis dressed in t-shirts and shorts buying labaneh. "*Akhsan leben ya Abu Simone!*" one of them crowed in a thick Hebrew accent. I was horrified. As soon as they

left the shop, Abu Ramon leaned towards me, lowered his voice and, in a conspiratorial tone, whispered, “Those are our neighbors.” I looked at him blankly, vaguely surmising that he was on the peace bandwagon too. Then he clarified, “It’s the Mossad!”

The sudden friendliness of our enemies made me uneasy. Not because we weren’t ready for it, but because their actions assumed our friendship could be had at the bargain rate of nice words and smiling handshakes. One day a well-dressed old man came to our door looking for Abu Ibrahim, our landlord’s long-deceased father. The elderly man was living in Jordan where a peace treaty with Israel had just been signed to great Israeli fanfare. Allowed to visit Jerusalem for the first time since 1967, he had come to see his family home, the building they had rented to the Saudi consulate, now occupied by the Mossad. We walked up the driveway across from Abu Ramon’s to the big metal gates at the entrance. He looked nervous as I rang the speaker bell. A gruff voice responded in Hebrew, “Who is it?” I explained that the owner of this building was visiting from Jordan and wanted to see his home. The voice on the other end went silent. Then said, “Wait a moment,” before cutting out. Within minutes the whole brigade of the building was either out on the second story balcony or opening windows to peer down at us. I wondered to myself what they thought they saw: two threatening apparitions, two pathetic exiles or just an old man and a woman in jeans. Having been through this before when I visited my family’s home in Jaffa, I sensed the anxiety that bordered on panic in my exiled neighbor, and gently patted his shoulder. He gave me a pale smile but his eyes kept scanning the building hungrily. Then the speakerphone came on and delivered the curt reply, “It’s not possible,” before shutting off.

## 1996

Friendship continued to evolve along the same lines. We came home from holiday and an Israeli flag was flying from the roof of a house in the *wadi* – the first settler take-over in the heart of the neighborhood. Going in or out of our front gate you couldn’t miss the flag waving at you like a bully. In quick succession three massive Israeli hotels sprouted up on no man’s land. The two Palestinian hotel sites in the *wadi* languished as two pits slowly filling up with sewage and garbage. The stream of friends visiting from Gaza dwindled to a small handful that had enough connections to get a permit. For the most part, friends from the West Bank could still visit if they had the will and tenacity to put up with whatever random treatment they received at the now-permanent checkpoint on the way in. National events were no longer held in Jerusalem because, for the most part, the only people able to attend them were people like us: Jerusalem’s now-demoted local residents. Soon enough the music of the competing weddings in the quarter began to fade until we finally found ourselves living in a silence that felt bereft.

One morning, still in pyjamas, I went to answer the door, cursing under my breath at the imbecile who kept insistently ringing the bell so early. I found an unbelievable sight waiting outside: heavily armed police and soldiers were amassed all over the

garden, up the front path, with even more of them spilling onto the street. I unlocked the outer glass door nervously, and found myself face to face with a bald but lithe police officer who held a document in his hand and barked at me in Hebrew. I replied in English that I didn't understand.

“Zees is house of Said Hindiyeh?”

“Yes, but he is deceased and we are only renting the place.”

He didn't understand and continued reading from the document.

“You must pay 83,000 shekel to (unintelligible something in Hebrew) for hospital for Suham Hindiyeh.”

The armed guys in the garden kept looking around, holding their weapons taut as if they were expecting an ambush.

“If you not pay, we seize the things of the house.”

I looked past him and realized that the soldiers were guarding a large truck. Slowly the scenario became clear: they'd brought the truck to haul off the house's contents unless the ghost of our landlord's father suddenly appeared and paid off the long overdue hospital bill of his similarly deceased wife.

In a tone and pace reserved for imbeciles I pointed out these minor hitches in his operational plans.

Bald head looked perplexed, turned and mumbled to one of his armed companions who in turn shrugged and muttered something back. When all else fails, Israeli security personnel always fall back on the same trump card and he demanded my identity card. Handing it to him, I asked whether this was how they showed up to collect medical bills in West Jerusalem.

## 1997

“Alex! Rema! Alex! Rema!” It was our neighbor, Adel, shouting over the garden wall with an urgency in his voice that said something was terribly wrong. “Settlers! Settlers are breaking into the house!” He was trembling and kept looking back over his shoulder. I looked across the empty lot and could see a stream of people, including soldiers and police, moving back and forth under the trees that shaded his house. “Do something! Call someone!” Alex called the closest thing there is to a Palestinian 911: Lea Tsemel, the Israeli human rights lawyer. I made Adel a cup of coffee and within half an hour the garden was full of reporters as the street filled up with more soldiers and police. Adel sat in silence, with the stricken look of someone who'd just witnessed a murder. Lea turned up: “It's a test case. There are Palestinian owners but they only have West Bank identity cards – the right wing wants to see if it can make Jerusalemites into absentees even if they live only a few miles outside the city. That way they can take over so many more properties.” I should have known by now: in East Jerusalem a bad incident always came with grand ambitions and a master plan.

The Israeli courts, in their usual even-handedness, ruled that while the case was being heard, Adel could stay in the house but settlers had the right to post guards in the garden.

Unable to have visitors at the house, he'd trundle over to our garden wall and speak in whispers even though the guards were well beyond earshot. "I haven't slept in months. First I was worried they would try to kill me. Every time I heard a sound I'd stand by the door with an iron pipe. It turns out they aren't settlers themselves but from a security company – these are Russians. They act nice enough, but who knows? Now they play loud music at night and you should see how they drink!" But there was a vague melancholy in the way Adel delivered this last bit of information and I realized that since the attempted takeover, he always politely declined my offer of a beer.

## 1999

The case went on for two years and was finally decided by politics – a few family members with rights to the house had US citizenship. Apparently, allowing the plunder of US nationals' property went beyond even the limits of American largesse to Israel. Adel, now with the well-earned stripes of a national hero, stopped by the garden wall with his new sidekick: a yappy little brown terrier called Max. "Interesting name," I said.

Adel looked uncomfortable and then cleared his throat: "Remember the big snow last winter? You know, the really big one? Well, it was late at night and suddenly I hear banging on the door and they're shouting, 'Let us in! Let us in!' *Haram*, there were two of them and the snow collapsed their tent. They were freezing."

"Adel, you let the guards into the house?"

"Only that one time. What's a person to do – let someone freeze to death?"

I know what I wanted to say but kept my mouth shut.

He went on, "You know, they're not all the same, the Jews. One of the guards, Max, I swear to God he's *maskiin*, just like us. He's Iraqi, well, I mean his parents were from Baghdad, the Jews tricked them into coming here. There they had a big house and servants and everything and here what was he – a guard! He had no choice, it's the only work he could find. He doesn't believe in Israel and settlers and all that crap but he has a family to feed."

It was hard to keep a straight face in light of this doggie twist to the Stockholm Syndrome.

"Adel, would you like a beer?"

He looked down at the terrier. "Yalla, Max – time for a drink?"

It was around this time that the Miss Havisham die-off began. First to go was Mary, and then a few months later, Midget Lady. Death then skipped a house and took Um Hisham who lived above us. Each time one of them died the quarter seemed to lose a little more of its memory. Their homes, now absent a shrine-keeper, would be summarily stripped, renovated and rented out as offices to anonymous foreign agencies and NGOs that came to promote the amnesia of "peace." Family members not living in the city believed installing an international agency – besides providing more lucrative rents – was the best way to protect their inheritance from Israeli takeover. But the loss of the shrines and the shrine-keepers, and their takeover by

outsiders felt just like forced evictions. A friend from the neighborhood took to calling them “settlers,” because once a home fell into their hands, it would never again revert to Palestinian occupants.

One morning, I saw Sitt Usra on the street, standing over a blacksmith doing some welding at her front door. I walked up and found her looking haggard and still in her nightgown, then realized the entrance was a mess of broken glass and black soot. Shaking her head, she explained that a Molotov cocktail had been lobbed at the house in the middle of the night. “I heard the crash of the bottle and woke up to find the front door on fire. Thank God we had the fire extinguisher.” Her brother weighed in, “We called the police and they showed up five hours later.” Then Sitt Usra looked at me in total incomprehension – “They kept saying, ‘You must have enemies. Who are your enemies?’” The blacksmith shut off the torch and let out a mumbled curse. If the Israeli police hadn’t been so obscene we might have laughed at their absurdity and self-delusion. Everyone knew who the enemies were and only in an instant of terrified desperation had Sitt Usra momentarily forgotten this and inadvertently sought help from their quarters.

Following the incident, Sitt Usra and her brother bunkered themselves behind a new steel door and shutters. She even had the blacksmith cover the small arched window above the front door. I’d always had to avoid peeping into their living room through the open door when I walked up the street. Now, with all the light blocked out, I could barely see them even when I was inside. Once the caretaker of all the ladies in the neighborhood, Usra was now the last of them and I couldn’t help feeling this was why she’d been attacked. Because once the shrine-keepers had gone and the foreign agencies moved in, I realized that they had been the keepers not just of their own homes, but of the entire quarter.

## 2000

In early 2000 a suspicious innovation appeared on our street: a row of six neatly sign-posted handicapped parking spots. We barely had pavements, rarely had garbage pick-up and our street lamps never had working bulbs. Full military escort for the delivery of medical bills or the dispatch of helpful policemen to treat pensioners for their Molotov cocktail habit was the type of city service we were used to. So this sudden appearance of municipal civility was downright ominous – especially since there were no disabled people in this part of the quarter in need of a parking space. And they were placed on a completely unoccupied portion of the road, sided by two empty plots that overlooked the homes in the *wadi* below.

A few weeks later, as I passed by the shiny signs on my way home, I realized that the skull-capped man standing next to the car parked in one of these handicapped spots was none other than the Israeli settler leader (and then-Knesset member) Benny Alon – a man whose name in the press was regularly accompanied by the word “virulent.” I parked and watched him in my rear-view mirror. He was talking on a mobile phone

and looking down into the *wadi*.

By early spring, the original house that the settlers had taken over in the *wadi* (not far below the parking spots) had a series of new additions: an adjacent building had been taken over, its Palestinian residents evicted, and settler families, wielding babies, prams and sub-machine-guns, had moved in, along with more gun-wielding security guards to be posted on their roofs. The owners of the handicapped parking spaces had arrived.

In May, I came home and the neighborhood was overrun by a massive settler festival. It was LagBa Omer, a day every year when Sephardi Jewish families would make their way over from their neighborhood, cross no man's land, and visit the tomb of the alleged Simon in our *wadi* when they couldn't make it to the real Simon's tomb in the Galilee. But while throngs of these dark-clad religious families regularly showed up, they were, on the whole, quiet and respectful visitors. This year everything had changed: Benny Alon and company had brought a menacing mass of gun-toting, baby-carrying, "Kahane Lives!" t-shirt-wearing settlers to dance to the horrendous din of settler rock-and-roll. The municipality had given them a license to set up this mass celebration of violence and power right in the midst of the homes of the Palestinians they wanted to erase from their neighborhood. And they had granted their sound system infinite decibel levels to ensure that the entire Arab part of the city couldn't miss the event's screaming message. I could have screamed as much as I wanted because their noise eradicated all other capacity for sound. Thankfully, spared an understanding of Hebrew, at least I missed the specific wording of calls for my neighborhood's ethnic cleansing.

June, and we were awoken in the middle of the night by what sounded like the roars of football hooligans. Peeking out of the window, we saw a group of about forty young Israeli men – settler youngsters, going by their get-up – dancing in the middle of our road with Israeli flags, whooping, roaring and breaking into menacing chants intended to let us know who owned the street.

"It must be Jerusalem Day," I grumbled. Alex started laughing.

"Alex, get away from the window! What's so funny?"

"Look at these bullies – they only come here in the dark and with an army jeep for protection!"

October came and Ariel Sharon was given permission by the Israeli government to enter the Haram al-Sharif. We all know what happened next.

## 2002

On my way to buy vegetables from "The Garden of Eden" up the road in Beit Hanina, I was startled by a massive sonic boom. I slammed on the brakes just in time to see an immense cloud of smoke explode over the Ramallah skyline: it was an F-16 fighter jet bombing the headquarters of the Palestinian Authority. A few nights later, at a dinner party around the corner from our house, a joke was suddenly interrupted mid-sentence

by the rat-tat-tatting of helicopter gunfire far over the horizon. We got up from the table and watched in shared horror the deadly display of red streaks piercing the night sky over Beit Jala.

In Jerusalem, after the IDF provided the first bloody event (killing seven demonstrators on the grounds of the al-Aqsa mosque) that gave the uprising its name, we were soon thrust into the wretched role of spectators. The original checkpoints that had barred our friends and families from entering the city now seemed to demarcate the line between Israel's brutal theatre of war on the other side and the farcical normality they rigorously enforced in East Jerusalem.

But the images of what was happening beyond the checkpoint were now a constant gruesome backdrop to our daily lives. "Baba, enough. Turn it off," I heard Abu Ramon's son beseeching him in the shop one day. Like every shopkeeper in the city, Abu Ramon had mounted a TV on the wall permanently tuned to al Jazeera, and had been in an adrenalin-dazed Intifada thrall ever since. "You should have seen his blood pressure last night," moaned Ramon. With eyes still glued to the screen, his father handed back my change, gave me a polite glance with a quick, "God bless your morning," before returning to Nablus and the invading tanks.

Like many others in the city, however, the main ingredients of my life were on the other side, in the theatre of war. To get there and back meant navigating through not just one checkpoint, but a dense thicket of them. My commute to work now involved crossing four of them each way – each with its own random moods, ludicrous demands and particular take on sadism. One would be a screaming traffic jam battle, the next an asphyxiating wait, the third a two-kilometer, rubble-strewn hike. I'd arrive at the University just in time to compare the similarly harrowing commutes of my students who'd made it to campus before we'd drag ourselves off for the checkpoint decathlon home.

The Second Intifada was as if the relentless pace of the "peace process" had been harnessed to the four horses of the apocalypse. Life became a pitiless odyssey through the brutish maze they had made of the landscape, punctuated by spasms of military invasion and aerial bombing. Against this annihilation of our familiar links between time, place and matter, like everyone else, I kept doggedly making the journey, believing I could defy the physics of despair. Until one day when, at the first checkpoint, I finally broke down. I couldn't do it. I just couldn't go on. My hands slowly steered the car to the side of the road and I sat in shock, trying to comprehend what had just happened. *Khalas*, I would go home. No more fighting this hopeless battle. But what was there at home? It had become the cave where I hid from the horrible world outside. And it was lonely. My friends, once close by, had at some imperceptible point begun to inhabit another country just a few miles down this miserable road. Jerusalem and my home had been made strangers to them. I had been fighting the fact of their exile, and of my own. And today, I just couldn't keep up the fight.

I turned down a backstreet and headed home. As I pulled into my street, I suddenly realized that a "flying checkpoint" had been slapped down just below my house.

Before the soldier manning it even had a chance to open his mouth, my window was rolled down and I was screaming at him that this was *my home right here*. Taken aback, he waved me away and I slammed my car a few meters forward into the space in front of my entrance. I got out and slammed the car door shut. Opened the front gate and slammed it shut. Then, just as I was ready to open the front door in anticipation of slamming it too, I noticed a figure cowering in the corner of the garden against the wall that blocks the view of the main street. I recognized her. She was one of the peasant women from Kharbatha who used to come and harvest the olives from the empty lot. She was covered in the October dust and leaves of olive picking and looked a thousand years older than when I'd last seen her and a thousand times more exhausted than I was. It had taken her most of the day to sneak in; after harvesting half a tree, she suddenly saw the soldiers arrive and fled fearing that they would pick her up as an "illegal infiltrator." Hiding here, hunched against the wall for hours, she'd been waiting for them to leave so she could make her way back home with her painfully small bundle of gleaned olives. She looked at me and then at the bundle. "Do you want some olives?" she offered.

## Epilogue

Adel, my neighbor, is still across the empty lot, guarding the home he lives in. In 2006, he got married and now lives with his stately wife, Fattoum, who made him give up both Max the dog and his drinking habit. In 2008, settlers tried once again to invade their house. Fattoum bravely deterred them by threatening to set the house on fire. The case of the house is still in court.

The Mossad is still in the adjacent building, but they stopped buying labaneh at the start of the uprising and now keep only one German Shepherd.

Abu Ramon still tends his shop in the quarter. His son, Ramon, who increasingly stands in for him, succeeded in getting him to take down the television from the wall. A small poster of George Habash now assists St. George in protecting the brandy and arak.

Sitt Usra's last ten years were overwhelmed by kidney dialysis treatment. She died of heart failure in January 2011. Her brother who had lived with her every single day of his sixty-eight years, followed her three days later. The extended family, mostly living in Germany, have thus far kept her house as a shrine.

In 2008, Muhammad and Fawzia "Um Kamil" al-Kurd were evicted from their home down in the *wadi* by settlers. Muhammad died of a heart attack eleven days later. Um Kamil continued to put up a brave fight and, for six months, held a sit-in at an empty lot near her home.

In 2009, the Ghawi and Hanoun families lost their homes in the *wadi* to settlers. They too have continued to fight in the courts, as well as by keeping permanent vigil in a protest tent across from their homes.

These three extended families who lost their homes are part of a larger group of twenty-three refugee families resettled in Sheikh Jarrah by UNRWA before 1967. The

remaining twenty are all under threat of losing their homes to settlers upon decision by the Israeli courts.

In all, the settler master-plan for the neighborhood envisages evicting more than five hundred Palestinians from Sheikh Jarrah and building three hundred settler homes in their place.

The two pits that were supposed to be Palestinian hotels are still pits. The rubble cemetery of my first landlord in the neighborhood finally got a building permit. Just completed, the four-story building has been rented for \$1.5 million a year by Tony Blair in his role as representative of the “Middle East Quartet.” He spends four days a month here and has never met with the families losing their homes in the neighborhood, nor ever made a statement about the plight facing the Palestinians of Sheikh Jarrah or of Jerusalem.

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