

In the House for Orphans

A Jerusalem Boyhood

Reja-e Busailah

Editor's Note:

The *Jerusalem Quarterly* is grateful to the Institute for Palestine Studies in Washington D.C. for permission to publish an excerpt from Reja-e Busailah's extraordinary memoir of his boyhood in Mandate-era Palestine (*In the Land of My Birth: A Palestinian Boyhood*, Institute for Palestine Studies, 2017). Here, Busailah takes us to the Old City and the House of Orphans, where his father has enrolled him because there were no other options for a blind boy. We enter the world of sound inhabited by a highly intelligent seven-year-old child, alert to everything around him, both the intimate details of his life and the turbulent public events surrounding him in Jerusalem.

I must have been almost seven when I was sent to a boarding school, the Islamic Industrial House for Orphans in Jerusalem (Dar al-Aytam al-Sina'iyya al-Islamiyyah). My parents did not know what to do about my education because of my blindness, my father told me later. The decision to send me to that school was made because there were no other options. They could have sent me to Schneller, the German missionary school, but they decided against it because of religion.

Before going to the school, I had already been made to see the doctor, Dr. Abu al-Arraj, though what a doctor had to do with the school was a mystery. He made me breathe while he put something cold against my back, then against my chest. He made me put my tongue out. I was puzzled and apprehensive.

The House for Orphans was in the Old City. It was quite far from Wad al-Joze but still within walking distance. My father took me there. We left early on a Saturday morning. We walked through Karm al-'Alami, where we passed the olive and medlar trees; then past Yousuf's store; on to Bab al-Zahreh; then Bab al-Amud; Bab Khan al-Zayt; Bab Hutta, where I was born; and finally, I believe, to Bab al-Sinisleh (al-Silsilah). We went through a big, heavy gate made of either iron or very thick, heavy wood. My father exchanged a few words with a man who seemed to have been waiting for us and then left hurriedly. The door closed after him with a heavy thud, big and final.

I was stunned. I could not believe that he had left. I was in a daze, surrounded by a mass of voices or sounds, vast and indistinct, without any meaning. My father thudded out and I thudded in through the heavy door.

A man grabbed me by the hand, jerking me out of my daze. We walked through a spacious cobbled yard and through the amalgam of sound. Then we turned right and walked up two flights of stairs, turned right again, and

continued through a narrow passage that opened both on the left and the right. We turned left and walked down a few steps and on through a spacious courtyard, which was called, I later learned, al-Manshar.

We reached what the man called “the shop.” Inside, there were people young and old, talking and doing something. Soon I realized they were all blind, and they were making brushes, brooms, and chairs. So many blind boys together, talking and working happily! But that was not enough to distract me from my father’s abrupt departure. Was he coming back? Did he go home? Did he really leave me?

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Entering the Old City through Bab al-Silsileh (Chain Gate). The House for Orphans, where I spent almost three years, was very close by. Khalil Raad Collection, IPS.

At first, I do not know where I am. It feels hard under me where I lie. It is wet, too, wet and cold. I have not done it in a long time. “Shame!” Mother would say, “Shame!” I am in a strange bed, a bed different from mine. The bed is narrow. I am not lying on the floor. I am in a narrow cot made of metal and cloth stuffed thin, above the floor. I hear sounds I have never heard before. I am surrounded by many breathings, frightened by their jarring harshness. I am alone among many I do not know, far from my parents and my sisters. I do not know this place, else I would go home. I cannot find my way in this large hall. I cannot find my way to that big door or gate with the big thud. And it is a long, long way from that gate to our house in Wad al-Joze.

At the shop the next day, the boys were expecting Sheikh Omar. He was not late arriving, with his cane and smelling of strong perfume. He went straight to the back room, his office. Soon he was calling to me. Muhammad Zayid walked with me. Sheikh Omar first asked if I liked the shop, but before I could respond he went on to the next questions: Did I know the Qur’an? How much did I know? “You better learn it, or else,” he said. “Muhammad Zayid will study with you, will help you.” Next he asked if I knew how to pray. My parents did not pray, and I did not. “Okay,” he said, “Muhammad Zayid will teach you how to pray, or else!” What else? I did not like Sheikh Omar. He had an old, soft voice and soft skin on his hand, but I did not like him. He made me feel uneasy.

Muhammad Zayid was a little older than I. He came from the village of Abu Shkhedim. He was gentle. You could hear kindness in his voice. I liked learning how to pray, though performing the ablution before every prayer soon became a chore, what with washing

the feet up to the hips, the neck and behind the ears, the hands up to the elbow, and the face. Muhammad Zayid kept emphasizing that I should never pray without washing first. “There will be terrible punishment,” he said, “for anyone who prays without washing.”

And there was a punishment soon to come. Mas’oud, it was rumored, had let out gas and prayed without making the ablution. It was said that before he was expelled from the school, he was flogged. I was glad I was not there when he was flogged. Later, I found out that I did not have to wash before every prayer if between the prayers I did not urinate, defecate, or let out gas. That was strange, and led to difficulties sometimes. Still, washing remained a chore. On the other hand, praying was soon to become fun, especially when we prayed at the mosque at night. I enjoyed all the motions – the standing while reciting verses from the Qur’an, the kneeling, the prostration, even the sitting on one leg, while all the time praising God and the Prophet. It was very much like play.

Days passed, and no Father, no Mother, only these boys who do not seem to care about either Father or Mother. They are preoccupied with many things, too many to think of Father or Mother. They laugh and play and learn as though this place were their home. Finally, about two weeks later, Mother came. She came and took me home, where I stayed the night. My sisters were there, and when I woke up in the middle of the night, the clock was there, ticking away as usual. I was reassured. But morning came, and Father and Mother were up early. I did not want to go back. I cried. I called to Mother.

“I would not send him to that school if there were any other,” I heard my father tell my mother. “Crooks wherever you go! At first he said there was no vacancy. He said maybe there would be soon, just to wait until after the elections. Now that the elections are over, he tells me there is a vacancy, but you have to pay. I told him that my son is not an orphan and that I was planning to pay in the first place. The crooks! No wonder Haj Amin’s reputation is falling. Anybody’s reputation would be hurt when surrounded by such people as this man Is’haq Darwish. I wouldn’t want this man as a janitor. And they make him a director! But your son has to go to that school. Maybe he can learn something there.”

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And so, it was not long before I was playing and laughing at the school. It was not long before I was making brushes like Muhammad Zayid, Ismail, and Abd al-Kareem. I began to belong again. We spent hours every day making brushes. From time to time, older boys or young men from the shop would go to faraway places in the city to deliver or sell what we made. I admired and envied them for being able to do this. They were smart and lucky. There was one, Talib by name, who did not make brushes. He only delivered or sold. He was partially sighted, and he had a distinctive accent. He came from faraway Beersheba, they said. He could count the sections of an orange even before peeling it. That was a feat, a marvel!

Later, Muhammad Ahmad, Mustafa Shu’aib, Mustafa Ibrahim, and I were made to join the sighted students in their classes to study Arabic, arithmetic, geography, history, and health. We even sat through drawing but did not draw. It was very enjoyable to leave

the stuffy room of the brush-making and go into the open, among those who could see, if only for a short while. . . .

I used to envy the sighted students because they seemed to make such use of pens and ink and chalk as I could not. And that would remind me of the slates and “pencils” at the kuttab. For some reason, the smell of ink and inkwells pleased and intrigued me. So did the sound of the chalk on the blackboard. When it did not screech, it was rich and full like the sound of Mother’s hair when she combed it. It was frustrating to me that though I was able to produce the same sound when I scribbled on the board with a stick of chalk, my sighted friends were not impressed. They only laughed. I liked filling my pocket with sticks of chalk.

Making brushes and memorizing the Qur’an are the prerogative or obligation of the blind. I did not mind making brushes, but I did not like the Qur’an following me to this school. There was enough of it at home with my father. The emphasis of the school was on the vocational – carpentry, printing, binding, and caning. That was for the sighted boys. Carpentry seemed to receive the lion’s share of attention. I used to enjoy going into the carpentry shop with the boys. It was very large. There we would fool around with the machinery.

The school had a band made up only, or mostly, of wind instruments. It was led by a Turk who used to taunt us for having supported the English against the Turks during the First World War. Referring to the Arab Revolt against Turkey during that war, he would say, “The English gave you almonds and sugar then. Now you have to pay them back. They will give your country to the Jews.” He spoke Arabic with a funny accent. I liked the accent but not what he said. There were girl students too, but they had their own quarters and I did not know what they did.

But there he comes. I hear his halting steps, his shuffling shoes. I hear the tapping of his cane approaching. I do not like him. I do not like his cane. I shall never carry a cane like him. I do not like the perfume he wears. Strange, that sometimes his perfume comes before him, and sometimes it follows him like a shadow!

It is late afternoon. I am about done making the last brush of the day. He passes through our room and says something in a vague, nonchalant voice. I feel uneasy. He goes down the three steps to where his office is, the inside room with the loose-tiled floor. There is going to be reciting today.

We are walking toward the reciting room. Muhammad Zayid says, “Now remember, the first verse of the three suras is the same, except – ”

“Except,” I interrupt, “the *Al-hadeed* sura does not have ‘what is.’”

“Good for you!” Muhammad Zayid says.

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Sometimes on Thursday evening, some of us boys walked to the Holy Haram to have a Turkish bath. There was a spacious room that was warm, if not hot. There was a variety of stone basins, large and small, deep and shallow. The temperature of the water varied. Some basins were warm, some quite hot. It was a delightful bonus to play or merely

lounge in the water there – so relaxing, so soothing, so much better than the baths Mother gave or the baths at school.

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In their sleep the boys made all kinds of sounds: breathing, snoring, moaning, and breaking wind. It was a humorous amalgam, though I felt afraid when the snoring with its various pitches prevailed. Blind Issam was a good boy, though a bit too innocent. Everybody liked him but everybody teased him too. His bed was not far from mine. One night I was waiting to hear him talk in his dreams, but he did not. Would he instead do what he had done another night, when the bedbugs got the upper hand with him? He woke us all up then, when, fully naked, he whipped the bugs off his body with his belt. “Crash!” echoed the hall with the whip. It echoed also with our uncontrollable laughter.

The bugs were very annoying, especially since they were impossible to catch. Our beds had plenty of them. They were strange; they bit you, but you felt the bite only after they had gone. But at least the bugs bothered us only at night. The lice bothered us day and night. We would catch them and crush them between our fingers. Each was the size, and more or less the shape, of a sesame seed. Every two or three weeks I would go home with bugs and lice, but what with Mother’s scrubbing and combing, I would always go back to school clean.

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At the table we were divided into two groups, with the dishes of olives (on “olive days”) and the dishes of olive oil and *zaatar* (on “olive oil and *zaatar* days”) placed in the middle of each group. It did not feel good when the blind hands bumped into each other while reaching for the olives in the congested traffic at our table. It felt even worse when they collided as they dipped the bread first in the oil and then in the *zaatar*. Often olive oil and *zaatar* spilled here and there and everywhere, and often there would be oil and *zaatar* stains on one of my sleeves. I smelled them, and I grew not to mind the smell. I knew we were different. I knew that the hands did not do this at any of the other tables in the dining room. My hand did not bump into my parents’ or sisters’ hands when I ate at home. Often I could sense how my parents were saddened, annoyed, or hurt whenever my hand miscarried as it traveled between the plate and my mouth. Their hands did not miscarry like mine. Nor did my sisters’. The blind must be no good. They are, as the Qur’an says, like the mute and like the deaf. They do not know. They are not equal to the sighted, like night is not equal to light, like shade is not equal to the blazing heat, like the living are not equal to the dead (Sura 35). The blind, then, must be cursed.

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There was never a moment of silence while we worked at the brush and broom shop. There was talking, there was joking, and sometimes there was the Qur’an. There was the noise from the caning shop nearby where the sighted boys worked. It was always

lively and boisterous there. Tala‘at and Zakariyya were frequent visitors from the caning shop to our shop. Tala‘at was serious, almost stern. Zakariyya was a puzzle to me. “Come Wednesday next,” he often said, “and all the blind shall be slaughtered like the Jews!” I believed him and I was afraid. Why “like the Jews?” I would wonder. The older boys were not afraid. They did not seem to care.

The school set up a microphone that was turned on whenever the Qur’an was being chanted over Radio Cairo by Muhammad Rif’at, ‘Ukashah, Munirah Abdu, Kareema al-‘Adliyya, and others. They all had good and appealing voices, and we often argued over who was the best. It was always so much better to listen to their voices sweetly chanting the Qur’an than to memorize it. But sometimes the microphone was still turned on when Abd al-Wahhab or Umm Kulthoum sang. That was always a treat. Abd al-Wahhab’s “*Ya dunya ya gharami*” (My love of life) and Umm Kulthoum’s “*Ala baladi al-mahboub waddeeni*” (Take me to my beloved town) were very popular then. Zakariyya said that Abd al-Wahhab had only one lung, and that a man had paid five pounds in order to kiss Umm Kulthoum through the glass! The radio announcer always described Umm Kulthoum as the “immaculate” or “infallible,” and the “Star of the East.” The word “immaculate” baffled me.

In the springtime we often heard the distinctive calls of two different doves: the one with the *coucucou-coucucou* call, which we boys translated into “*uthkuru rabbakum*,” the other with the “*ya joukhti*” call. The first reminded us to remember our God, the other sang about her precious feathers. It was strange that the call to remember God was cheerful, while the singing about the precious feathers was so mournful. And there was the *sinounou*, the bird who came in late spring, flying low and screaming loud and blithe. He was black. They said he never came down to the ground because he had weak legs, so that, once on the ground, he would not be able to fly again.

Many stories were told at the shop. Many dealt with the English and the Jews, against whom we were fighting to keep them from taking our country. The stories were told in expanded and contracted form, at work and outside work. There was the story of the



This studio portrait was taken around 1940. My sister Laila is to my left; my sister Najeebah is to my right, and seated in front is my brother Muhammad. My sister Salwa was still a baby. Family album.

dog that howled for three days straight, a bad omen, and in fact soon after the English surrounded the village and killed the rebel Haj Ahmad and his two sons. There were stories of English planes dropping fire on the rebels near the village of Deir Ghassaneh, where many Arabs died.

Everybody, especially Abd al-Kareem and Hamid, talked about the bravery of Abu Durrah and Sheikh Izz al-Din al-Qassam. Everybody spoke with admiration and sadness about the self-sacrifice of Sheikh Izz al-Din. Sheikh Izz al-Din was a learned man. He had graduated from the great al-Azhar University – unlike Sheikh Omar who, I was sure, did not have much learning. Muhammad Zayid’s hero was Hasan Salameh. Whenever he talked of him, his voice went low and reverent. The rebels, it was said, would outwit the English and their pursuing hounds by sprinkling black pepper behind them, which confused and frustrated the hounds.

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The jinn were never far from our thoughts, and Muhammad Zayid had many stories to tell about them. Every story had a hero called Hasan and a villain called Iddis. Hasan had a soft, gentle voice, while Iddis’s voice was harsh and coarse. Almost every place was haunted, and woe to him who would venture to any of these haunted places at night. The carpentry shop on the first floor had a *marid*, an evil member of the jinn. We kept daring each other to go there at night.

One Thursday night three or four of us approached the shop, which had a broken window. After some urging and daring, I volunteered to confront the *marid*. When I got close to the window, I heard my companions run away. I was shaking but I stuck my head in the window and shouted, “*Marid! Marid! Marid!*” and then ran away. No one was in pursuit. I became a skeptic, but I was something of a hero for a short while.

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Muhammad Ahmad told the story about a church bell that sounded muffled. It used to be a good bell, strong and sonorous, the way church bells are supposed to be, he said. But this bell kept disturbing a saint in his sleep, so that the saint finally got up and slapped the bell so hard that its sound went somber and sad. Muhammad Ahmad had been to Schneller and would sometimes sound a bit different from boys like Muhammad Zayid and Issam.

One day while strolling, we were going over the chapter in the Qur’an called “the Earthquake.” I had memorized the chapter but still did not know what an earthquake was, even though from an early time my mother and some of our neighbors spoke of the earthquake and even dated events by it. So I asked my comrades about the meaning of earthquake. Mustafa Ibrahim laughed and said, “That’s when the earth swings and sways, so that buildings fall and people die. You see, the earth rests on one horn of the Big Bull down there. When the bull gets tired, he switches to the other horn and an earthquake takes place.” When I asked where the bull stood, Mustafa said impatiently, “Shut up, Reja-e! You always want to know who brought forth the chicken and who laid the egg! Soon you will be asking who created God. The bull stands in the water.”

The hyena story was common, with many variants. One night, a man was walking alone or riding his donkey when an animal suddenly brushed against him, quietly and softly. The man was afraid, for he knew it was the hyena. The hyena then urinated on his own tail, shook it in the man's face, and ran off. The man was spellbound and ran after the hyena calling, "Father! Father! Father!" They ran until they reached a cave. The hyena entered with the man following. Often in the story, the man would never be heard from again; the hyena got him. But in other versions the man was lucky. That was when he hurt himself as he ran after the hyena, cutting himself by brushing or bumping against a rock or stone just before reaching the cave. His bleeding broke the spell and brought him back to his senses. Everybody was afraid of the hyena. When children cried at night and refused to sleep, their mothers would warn them that the hyena was coming to eat them, and then there would be silence.

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Meanwhile, the Long Strike ended and we were back at school after the summer holiday. The Rebellion, however, continued. The Jews were still flooding our country. They were coming in through Haifa and Tel Aviv like waves big and small, in public and in secret. They were coming brazenly to steal away Falasteen. Sliman the artist used to say, "Thieves steal from you in the black of night; Jews rob you in the white of day." I understood the general meaning but was still vague about the "black of night" and the "white of day." Also, everyone was now talking about Balfour and how vicious he was. I had heard the name before because my father and our neighbors often mentioned it, but the references had meant little to me then. He was the one who wrote the memorandum giving Palestine to the Jews, as if Palestine was his country! We all hated Balfour.

Our rebellion against the English was growing and spreading fast, the fighting intensifying by the day. The Jews and the English were fighting back. The Jews were good at planting time bombs in markets and crowded places. Abu Ibrahim al-Hawwash, our neighbor, told about a Jew who planted a time bomb in the Old City and who was running away after the bomb exploded, killing and injuring many. Lots of people ran after him yelling, "Catch him! Catch him!" The fleeing Jew then started yelling, "Catch him! Catch him!" along with the others so as not to be noticed. But Abu Ibrahim caught him by his shirt, and the pursuers fell upon him and killed him. How Abu Ibrahim's shirt got bloodstained! How I admired Abu Ibrahim!

For the first time, I began to learn some differences between guns – the old Turkish gun, the Italian gun that was more noisy and flashy than effective, the English gun that was pretty good. But the German gun was the best. It had a longer range and was more accurate. How I wished to hold one! There was the gun that rattled bullet after bullet, nonstop. It was loud and shrill and was called a machine gun. Then there was the gun that also rattled bullet after bullet but made only a low sound. They called it a *mitrailleuse*. And there was the small gun, which was the wonder of wonders. It fired but made no sound at all! It could kill you without anybody ever hearing of it. We called its bullets "dumdums."

The English were killing us with their guns and hanging our rebels. They uprooted our trees and burned our crops. They blew up homes with dynamite and made people homeless. They forced the people to pay terrible fines. If only I could kill one! They tortured their prisoners, hanged them by their feet, yanked out their fingernails, and did other terrible things to them. They came to help the Jews take our land and homes. The Jews and the English were bad. The Germans were good because they did not like the English. If only they would come and help us against the English and the Jews. The Italians were good too. Most of us were glad when they won in Ethiopia. There was a popular song then supporting Mussolini against the Ethiopians, and I used to be puzzled by the line, "Stick to the macaroni, and stay away from the eggplant!" It was not long before even Franco was good because the English did not like him, and because he was friends with the Germans and the Italians.

Every now and then, a Palestinian was hanged by the English, and the people were sad and angry. The victims were always brave. They walked to the beam steadfast and eager to die. They became martyrs. In sympathy and solidarity with the many prisoners, everybody, young and old, would sing the most popular song then, which began, "Spread and cover us, O darkness of prison, for we love the prison with its dark, because after imprisonment there is only the rising dawn of another day."

About this time, I developed the habit of going after the news. In those days the newspapers were the principal source. My father would bring home the morning paper, and before he was done, I would snatch it from him and run downstairs to our neighbors, where one of the two Hawwash sisters, Wadad or Fawziyyeh, would read it to me. I wanted to hear how many Britons and Jews were killed and what bank or post office was robbed. I loved it when our rebels made off with such-and-such a sum of money from this post office or that bank, the Ottoman Bank and especially Barclays.

It was during this same period that I began to hear stories about Fuad Hijazi, Ata al-Zeer, and Muhammad Jamjoum, and about English cruelty and injustice to them, and about the courage of these three men who on the day of their execution argued with each other over who should walk to the gallows first. Each wanted to be the first to become a martyr. Muhammad Jamjoum broke out of his chains and beat Ata al-Zeer to the gallows. The three were hanged at the Acre Prison on a Tuesday, with an hour between each execution. For a long time after, Tuesday was considered a day of bad luck: "Don't travel on Tuesday." Some would also say, "Don't take a bath on Tuesday, don't clip your nails, don't cut your hair," else harm may befall you.

These executions had taken place years before the Great Rebellion, but now they took on new meaning. Once Abd al-Kareem said laughing, "I would like to see Muhammad Ahmad racing to the gallows to give up his life for his country!" We all laughed. "Imagine someone who went to Schneller, a school for the Christians, giving up his life for his country?" he continued. "Didn't they feed you pork over there?" And we all laughed. "Lachen, Lachen, Muhammad Ahmad," someone added, mimicking the little song Muhammad Ahmad had been taught at Schneller. Muhammad Ahmad had liked to sing this song, and he used to end his singing with the rapid rubbing together of his palms.

We all loved the poet Abu Salma. We loved him for his poetry, his bravery, and for his defiance of the English. In his poem “*Jabal al-Mukabbir*” (Mount Mukabbir), he wrote, “We will not cease until we have brought down the Bastille.” For that, the English fired him from his teaching position. The Bastille here is the Government House, which the English erected on Mount Mukabbir and where the English high commissioner resided. Abu Salma also denounced the Arab kings in his famous poem, “Spread on the Flame of Song.” All of us loved that poem. The poem denounces the Arab kings of Hijaz, Yemen, and Egypt, along with Emir Abdullah of Transjordan, for letting the Rebellion down, for letting us down, for betraying Falasteen. They betrayed us when they made us lay down our arms and trust the English.

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We became suspicious even of the Arab Higher Committee because it had agreed to end the strike, placing its full trust in the English. How could we trust the English when they were killing our men, destroying everything, and promising our country to the Jews? How could we, when right after we ended the strike they sent the Peel Commission to Palestine, which the next summer decided that our country should be partitioned between us and the Jews and that the Jews would be given the better part of the country, the fertile part including al-Jaleel (Galilee)? And that tens of thousands of Arabs would be forced out of their homes? Absurd, all of us agreed. The Arab Higher Committee must be suspect, then, even though Haj Amin is its chairman.

Of course, the Jews agreed to the partition. “Does not this prove,” my father said to Abu Yousuf, “that the English are not to be believed or trusted? When they came to our country, they denied that they wanted to give our country to the Jews. Now they only want to divide it between us and them. Ha! Just wait, and you will see more.”

Abu Yousuf agreed and added, “Yes, the English are much worse than the Jews.”

It was around this time that I first heard the story of King Suleiman (Solomon) and the two women both claiming the same baby. The false mother agreed to King Suleiman’s proposal that the baby be divided between them. The real mother refused. How smart and wise King Suleiman was! In their claim, the Jews were as false as the false mother.

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At the beginning of my third year at the House of Orphans, it was announced that the blind were to start learning Braille. This was a curiosity at first. We were to spend an hour or two one evening a week learning Braille somewhere outside the school. We were to be taught by two blind men, Mr. Jameel and Mr. Subhi. Mr. Subhi had a loud voice; Mr. Jameel a low, soft one. They were not from our school. The class was held in a large room in a large building. We learned little, and I was not very fond of either teacher. We were tired at the end of the day, though I did enjoy getting out of the school and walking in the open. Often I fell asleep while the two teachers were busy with other students. Somehow I cared little about the stylus and the slate or about the ruler and the clamp that held the paper straight on the slate.

One evening I wake up to find myself alone in the big room. Everyone has left. I call out, but there is no answer, only the echo of my voice in the immense silence. I call again and again, and I panic as I hear my voice grow louder. How could they go and leave me? I get up and find the door. It is locked. I pull on the handle in vain. I am afraid—afraid that the building may be haunted by a *marid* or a ghost. This time the *marid* would be quite different from the *marid* who haunted the carpentry shop, more vicious. There may be even an *'amura* there, she who tricks you, confuses you, and ends up doing you much harm, probably killing you.

At last I hear – or think I hear – a sound. I am confused by feelings of fear and hope. I wait. I hear the sound again, and my heart skips a beat. What can it be? The sound grows nearer and clearer, until it becomes footsteps, then the click of a key in the keyhole, and the voice of Saleem calling my name. I am at the door. “That’s what you get, when you fall asleep!” he says. But I am rescued.

One day, Muhammad Zayid, Muhammad Ahmad, and I were told that we were wanted down at the main office. So we went. Muhammad Zayid was called in first. He came out two minutes later. Before we could talk to him, I was called in. A man (later I learned that he was the director of the school) told me, “This is the mufti, Haj Amin.” A hand stretched out. I took it, I shook it, and I kissed it. It was hairy.

“*Allah yirda alaik*” (May God bless you), the owner of the hand said in a low, calm voice. I was in awe before our leader, the great Haj Amin. The three of us said little to one another about this incident. But I thought much about it, about the hairy hand, the deep gentle voice, and especially about his saying “May God bless you,” and about the enigma of whether blindness was a blessing or a curse. Why should the great Haj Amin call us in, let us kiss his hand, and give us the blessing? Were we cursed and therefore needed a blessing, or were we blessed and he needed a blessing? How would our kissing his hand bless him? He needed a blessing? Our great mufti in need of a blessing from us! Contrary to my expectation, my father did not seem much impressed when I told him of this. “Ah, yes,” he said. “And was the director there? Was Is’haq Darwish there?” That was all.

This incident took place about the time the English laid siege to the al-Aqsa Mosque for several days, and soon after, I believe, Haj Amin slipped out of the country in order to evade the English. The days of that siege were very difficult, with much firing at the mosque and from the mosque. They said many died. The English imposed a curfew on the city and shot at anything that moved. One dusk during the siege, I was walking to al-Manshar and the brush and caning shop when suddenly an object whizzed by with a whistle and slammed into the wall nearby. Later, they told me it was a bullet that may have been deliberate or that may have gone astray. I was lucky, everybody said.

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