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Flesh and Stone: A wanderer's mosaic

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FLESH AND STONE: A WANDERER'S MOSAIC

by

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Bachelor of Arts, English
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1999

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2004

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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ABSTRACT

Flesh and Stone: A Wanderer’s Mosaic

by

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There are places in the world that never seem to leave the news, and yet for all we hear of them, we really know very little. The West Bank is one of these, its truths and realities obscured by the blinding flash of news cameras and political manipulation. It remains near the front of our consciousness in part because of its constant unrest, but also due to its role as nexus for three main world religions.

This work grew out of an impulse to describe and explain the experience of living as a foreigner on the West Bank. Taking the form of a creative memoir—neither entirely fact nor total fiction—it is rather like life there, on the edge between worlds and times, an image made of fragments, its depth and color a matter of perspective.
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CHAPTER 1

GOING AND COMING

Acceleration pulled me back into the seat, until, with a mild lurch, the plane lifted, arrowing west toward the mountains, then banking and circling back over the valley, headed east. I was on my way, going back to a place I really didn’t belong. This trip began a few weeks before, with an email from the West Bank; the note was brief, but not the sort one should read at work. Of course I read it, and after the tears, I began hunting for an affordable ticket. Mamasan was ill, she had cancer, wrote Ilham in her uncertain English, but would almost certainly feel better if I visited. How do you explain to coworkers or friends the compulsion to return to the Middle East? Neither religion, blood-ties nor marriage could claim me, and a post 9-11 world had nothing to recommend such a course. Still, a short time later, I found myself aboard a plane as it climbed sharply above the city, following a path I had last taken two decades ago.

In the weeks before leaving I made preparations for what I hoped would be an uneventful trip. I’d cleared my desk at work, made arrangements for my teenaged son to have a ride to school and stocked the pantry. On my desk I left an envelope with a cursory list of what should be done in the event I was late returning, which was as close as I wanted to come to admitting something could go wrong. I’d packed lightly, with both culture and weather in mind: no short sleeves, dark, quiet colors, long sweaters and a couple of scarves. I could guess what the weather would be, but other conditions were
unknown. Like listening through a heavy curtain, one hears noises, senses motion, but
has no way to prepare for the actuality. Were things as bad as they seemed on the news?
Fifteen years was a long time, and anything I once knew would be either insufficient or
irrelevant.

Security for flights bound to Israel is tight. It starts early, and is quite thorough.
The stepped up, hyped up 'increased security measures' now followed at U.S. airports
have been second nature for Israelis for decades—they invented the term, or at least the
techniques. One thing to learn quickly, traveling in Israel, is the importance of not
drawing the attention of security forces. They are deadly serious, and an uncooperative
traveler will most likely be 'escorted' at gunpoint for further questioning. Entry into or
exit from the country is not a given.

I faced the dilemma, as I lined up in New York for the transatlantic leg, of either
telling the truth—sure to cause delay, probably interrogation, and likely even denial of
entry—or lying. I had little in the way of a plausible lie, but I tried it. My purpose in
traveling to Israel? Tourism. Hmm. Perhaps that was not the best choice. Back in the 70’s
and 80’s it was okay to say I was a tourist going to Israel. Post-uprising, the line is
unexpected. No one travels alone to Israel, certainly not as 'just a tourist.' I was passed
up the line to a supervisor for further questioning. Exactly what kind of mischief a single,
slim, well-searched, empty-handed middle-aged American woman might be up to was
not for me to say, but I fine-tuned my story very quickly, making the truth serve,
although it was perhaps a little bent by the time we got through. I wasn’t a tourist; I was
an ex-resident, going to visit family in Tel Aviv. Luck smiled on me. They didn’t follow
up with phone calls or deeper scrutiny. A few more questions, some chit-chat about the
country and how long it had been, an assumption allowed as to my ethnicity, and I passed muster enough to board, probably thanks in great measure to my nationality and gender.

Years and experience have made a different traveler of me. Where once everything was new and exotic, a parade of colorful foreignness passing by while I gazed wide-eyed and charmed, I now spent my time observing and categorizing my fellow travelers. I played the game “name that origin,” examining clothes, movement and posture for clues about who they were, where they came from, their destination and purpose. A whole flock of pale pilgrims, retired Christians of some denomination or another, from the South, judging by their honey and grits accents, on their way to “walk in Jesus’ footsteps.” The man in the plaid suit jacket, with thick, shiny, badly cut hair? Arab, working in the U.S., probably as a laborer, judging by his weathered hands. Reserved, silent older woman, suit dress, hair immaculate, detailed accessories? Arab Christian, returning from a visit to her family. The one in the grey jogging suit, lightly curled hair? Israeli, wishes he was living in the U.S. or even Europe. I listened to a conversation in which the speakers, Orthodox by the looks of them, switched flawlessly between New York flavored English and Hebrew. A family with four blond, blue eyed children, mother’s hair tied back under a triangular scarf, big raw boned father? American Jews, flat Mid-west accents, and from the conversation, recent immigrants returning to their apartment in Haifa. I tried to imagine their daily lives, with weekly lessons at the language school, lighting the Shabbat candles and walking to synagogue. I saw them in the very act of transformation, of becoming and redefining themselves as different people.
I looked across the waiting passengers and the divisions were as clear as a stripe painted on the highway. Where once I couldn’t tell an Israeli and an Arab apart, I learned over time to recognize not only the difference, but to discern the family and socio-economic background of each—particularly if given a few moments to listen to their speech and interactions. An Arab is never ‘just’ an Arab. They’re as politically, religiously and socially diverse as a people or group of people can be. Similarly, a Jew is never ‘just’ a Jew--there are many varieties, not all indicated by dress or behavior. While the majority of Israelis and Palestinians are moderate or somewhat secular, the strongly religious are more visible and often more vocal. A lot of them get tired of the struggle; others welcome it as a way to define themselves. I can’t help but wonder what lifelong warfare does to the psyche, and whether peace wouldn’t be another kind of struggle for them both.

Once loaded, the plane pulls away and stops, perhaps a quarter mile off, for over an hour. The delay is not explained, although takeoff is estimated, accurately, and proceeds uneventfully. The announcements roll by first in English, then Hebrew, French, Arabic, and what sounds like German. Craning my head around to look behind me through the thick Plexiglas window, I watch the last of North America fade from view. Going west to east, a flight to Israel is only a matter of a day. It seems much longer, unbearably wearying as thousands of unmarked ocean miles pass below. The rumble of the aircraft is inescapable, seeping through my bones, bypassing earplugs and going straight into my head. Sleep comes and goes, languages flit in and out, and I’m suddenly awash in things I’d forgotten: the strangely intent air of people always on edge, defensive, protective of the very space they occupy; the devoutness that sets them to
praying at allotted times, regardless of location; the awareness of my own complete un-
belonging. I'm not a member of either club, not involved, and am interested in this place
more out of habit, and only as it affects people I know. My indignation rises briefly with
each news article I read, then fades away all too rapidly with the recognition of my own
helplessness. Sometimes it's easier not to know.

Late afternoon has fallen when we touch down at Ben Gurion, in Tel Aviv. The
passengers are subdued, quietly gathering their bundles. I was expecting something
different, perhaps the spontaneous applause and singing I remembered from my first trip,
at least some excitement, or even relief. There is nothing but stoic silence, broken by the
multi-language announcements. The air still smells like ocean and jet fuel, just as it did
before, but the magic is gone. Now I know that it's the same smell in New York, or San
Diego, Portland or even perhaps (I extrapolate here) Sydney. Flight makes the most far
away places seem mundane; it scales them back, so that whatever image you had of the
place is shrunk down to a uniform rush of miniature streets and buildings, trees and cars
and the whiz of it's-all the-same-city-just-the-language-is-different. Yet I hold some
memory of that original excitement, of the golden hope the country once represented.
Things have changed, though. Orange groves no longer edge up against the airport.
Instead it's bordered by miles of razor wire, rusty industrial buildings, and concrete walls,
all shabby, dirty and worn. Mythic Israel, land of gardens, milk and honey, exists only in
imagination. I was young when I first stepped onto that much disputed strip of land—too
young, I would say now—and remarkably naïve.
Rising and Falling

Over the years, I’ve often been asked why we went. At first, I would fend off the questions with humor, saying that I was just along for the ride, or that I was following my husband around. Later, I would toss it off as a get-rich-quick scheme that didn’t work. Neither was completely true. Like the events that set rockslides or avalanches suddenly loose, the exact cause can be difficult to pinpoint. Neither my husband nor I was Jewish, yet we fastened onto this place, back in the late seventies, and moved heaven and earth to get there. Certainly there was the media-reinforced image of a brave little nation fighting for its existence, a slender wedge of democracy on the barren edge of a hostile world. And so, with the perennial optimism of our national character, we picked this underdog to root for. How better to support democratic ideals than to go and help build this outpost? I blush now at this, but in apology I note that time has cured my idealism and at least some of my ignorance. And there was the hope that my husband had of setting up a ‘business’ in this wide open land of opportunity. Of course, we lacked the major qualifications for such entrepreneurship—experience, information and capital—but that didn’t stop us.

I believe now, with the benefit of hindsight, that the things which drew us there were more personal, less easily voiced. The Holy Land attracts many seekers, and although it wouldn’t have been the term I’d have chosen at the time, we were searching, looking for a life outside of the average, a mission, perhaps, or just a more compelling reason or way to be. The one factor I was least comfortable with was religion. My husband had managed to absorb all the drama of faith, with none of the technicalities of practice, and was deeply attracted to the idea, a sort of religion of religion. He chose to seek where the roots grew deepest, where everyday language evoked the panorama of
history, and where life itself could be viewed in terms of faith. I had no religion. My inquiring forays into various doctrines had left me well versed in practices, but short on conviction, and this same skepticism was echoed in a mild rejection of my native culture. I was looking for something bigger and better to believe in—an impulse like that which leads to youthful vegetarianism or short-lived bouts of ill considered activism.

In midsummer of 1978, a few months away from the birth of my first child, I was surprised but not unwilling when my husband returned from a ‘reconnaissance’ trip saying he’d found a place for us. He had just spent three weeks in Eilat, a town on the edge of the Sinai Desert, and he wanted our child to be born there, so that it would have Israeli citizenship. Alas, lack of information foiled what otherwise was a good idea. Being born in Israel does not make one a citizen—just ask the Arabs. Nonetheless, ignorance being close to bliss, we happily bought tickets for a departure two weeks before I was due. The plan was to fly in, have the baby, and fly back—all to be accomplished within the span of twenty-one days allotted by our tickets.

It was all new to me. I’d never flown, never left my own continent, never even known anyone from another country. The sight of the airplane—a 747—had been enough to make me stop and stare. Yes, I had read everything I could get my hands on about the country and the religion, but it was not enough to prepare me for the sight of men with long curls, dressed in scarves and hats, bobbing and chanting in the aisles. Nor was I prepared for the full scale celebration when the aircraft touched down, as applause, singing, and excitement overtook the cabin.

The furor was both religious and patriotic in nature. As they say, every Jew has two homes—his own and Israel—and so, for the Jewish passengers, this was a
homecoming, a return to their native land, even if they didn’t actually live there. Going back to Israel, even for a visit, was an expression of faith, a religious act. Moving to Israel is called ‘aliyah,’ or ascending—they’re getting a little closer to heaven. Those who leave ‘descend’ from a loftier place. At the time I didn’t notice the silent ones, although now I know they were there, quietly waiting and preparing for entry, something that was bound to be an ordeal at best. It was their country too, but because of their ethnicity they were foreigners, even though they were born there, and would always be strangers at the gate, begging admittance to what was properly their home.

Our flight was late arriving, and there were only a few hours between arrival and morning. It made no sense to try and find a room; we would do as my husband had done before: catch a bus to downtown Tel Aviv, and wait at the appropriate stop for the bus to Eilat. It sounded simple enough. We debarked from the city bus and began walking, and when we got to our stop, I got my first inkling that things here were going to be very different. The bus station was not a building with chairs and bathrooms and a vending machine in the corner, but simply an area of town, several blocks square, where all the busses converged, picking up and departing at their assigned times from their assigned spot. There was no ‘station,’ there were no amenities, and there were plenty of rats. I pulled my feet up onto the bench, shuddering, and tried to doze, miserable and scared but determined not to show it.

Worse yet, about midway to morning I was forced to recognize that the lower back ache I’d had for hours was turning into actual labor. I imagined giving birth on a dirty bench in a dark, unknown city. On the verge of tears, I told my husband. Yes, I was pretty sure it was labor, and no, I was still determined not to have this baby in a hospital.
We went over the options. There probably was no hotel room available—after all, this wasn’t Vegas—we had no idea where to find one, and we hadn’t budgeted for that anyway. We decided that, since first labors are notoriously long, we would still be able to catch the bus to Eilat, where a room was waiting. It was only a couple of hours until daylight. I slept a little, my head on his leg.

The trip to Eilat was endless. I washed in and out of awareness of my surroundings, trying to doze, trying to keep control of myself and my body. I clearly remember the heat and light of Beersheba, a town at the top of the Negev desert, where we stopped for a break. The bathroom was down a flight of stairs, almost un-navigable in my over-ripe condition. I felt my way down, step by blind step, hindered not only by the near darkness, but my distended, pain-wracked belly. Once safely down, I encountered my first ‘squatter’ toilet. I’d never even heard of such a thing before, and wondered if somehow I’d missed the bathroom—what on earth was this hole in the floor?—until I caught a clue from the evidence of other users clinging to the flat porcelain. I gingerly stepped onto the little foot-shaped platforms and held my nose, trying not to retch. The stench was unlike anything I’d ever encountered.

Another spasm hit me as I started up the stairs, and I held on to the wall, shaking with the pain, waiting for it to pass. After a moment, I was accosted by a strange, dark woman in an embroidered dress. She clucked at me and addressed me in an unfamiliar language. I shook my head at her. With some insistence she continued to talk, and when I didn’t respond she gently took hold of my shoulders and helped pilot me up the stairs and back into the daylight. I had no idea that I’d just been aided by ‘the enemy,’ for I didn’t
recognize her as an Arab, but her kindness stayed with me and gave me the will to climb back aboard the bus.

On arriving at the station in Eilat, the bus emptied out almost instantly. The driver, aware of the situation, insisted that, rather than going to the hostel, where we had a room, we were going to the hospital. Far too tired to argue, I went. I was committed to the idea of a natural birth, no incisions, no drugs, no doctor. Despite the fact that I had sworn I would never subject myself to the process of a medical ‘delivery,’ my insistence was tested to the max. The staff of the hospital had a set way of doing things, procedures they considered necessary, none of which I would consent to. All I needed was some water to wash up with and a clean room to give birth in. No, and no, and no again. Finally, my husband hit upon describing my decisions as religious strictures. Ah, well, that was different. The staff made allowances, and we were placed in a small recovery room, with little time to spare. A nurse remained in the room for supervision, which turned out to be quite fortuitous. She recognized that the umbilical cord was wrapped around the baby, and showed my husband how to unwrap it, after which the delivery proceeded rapidly and easily—relatively speaking. And so my daughter was born on a late summer afternoon in a small desert city, a world away from home.

Nestled at the innermost point of the Gulf of Aqaba, an arm of the Red Sea that reaches up along the Sinai Peninsula, Eilat shared more than a few attributes with our native Las Vegas. It was a ‘vacation destination,’ a mecca for offbeat people seeking a warm escape from Europe, and it had a lazy, live-and-let-live attitude. The climate was quite similar—hot and dry to the extreme—and the sun beat down with the same direct intensity, although from a slightly different angle. The mountains and soil had the same
baked-bare, extremely weathered texture of my native Nevada. However, Eilat could boast of a beautiful beach, curled around the tip of a blue finger of water, plus all the beachfront hotels and water sports to go with it.

After I slept for nearly two days, waking up only to feed and change the baby, the staff was convinced I was either sick or crazy, but they finally gave me the standard new-mother directions, the address to a well baby clinic, and I was released. My husband came to pick us up, accompanied by his friend, Claude, the director of the youth hostel. Claude’s vehicle was, without doubt, the smallest, most decrepit pick-up I had ever seen. It had seen more than its share of close calls, attested to by the many dings and crumples in its body, and it had been hand painted—literally, with spray cans and paintbrushes—in a variety of colors, mostly greens. It had a home-built wooden shell on the back that was far too large for its tiny chassis, giving the impression that the whole shebang was ready to flop over on its side at any moment. Claude, a French-Israeli whose accent made his English nearly comical, patted the hood and said, “Ees my leetle ‘orse,” a play on the truck’s model name, the Hebrew word for horse. Claude insisted politely that I sit in the cab with David, while he rode in the back of the shell. Efficient and pragmatic in true Israeli style, though, he instructed David to stop at the green grocer’s warehouse. I waited in the truck and tried to keep the sun and flies off my newborn, while they placed orders for the next week and picked up a few crates of salad vegetables for dinner.

David had met Claude and his wife on the previous trip to Israel. Middle-aged, both French-Israeli, Claude and Valda were on opposite ends of the personality spectrum. Claude was a talkative people-person. Valda remained hidden behind a sub-zero exterior. They ran the biggest hostel in Eilat. She did the books and he did everything else, with
the help of a handyman, a part time cook and volunteers. It was possible for travelers to earn bed and board by volunteering for kitchen duty or cleaning, but there was seldom enough of this free labor to get everything done. Claude was overworked, and when David had volunteered on his last visit, bringing a myriad of skills, he had recognized perhaps something of a kindred soul in him, as well as a pair of very capable hands. The two had hit it off remarkably well, despite linguistic differences, and Claude had been fascinated by David’s plan to design and market a new type of rapid deployment equipment to the IDF (Israel Defense Forces). Like most Israelis, Claude had served his time in the army, and still went for his reserve duties on a regular basis. Under the surface of nearly every Israeli lies a citizen-soldier with an ongoing interest in things military.

We were given a room at the hostel for the duration of our stay, and I went about learning how to care for a new baby. David volunteered in exchange for our board, working the desk or the dining room in the mornings, doing repairs and maintenance in the daytime, and he spent the evenings enjoying the influx of travelers that flowed in and out of the hostel gate. He was drawn to people like a moth to light, and would sit and chat for hours, on any topic, with anyone. I preferred the physical place, with smells and sounds and even the air itself all new to me, interesting and provocative on an almost cellular level. Sunrise and sunset were my favorite times, when the sun would crack red, setting alight the water and the mountains. I went as often as I could, on those bright mornings and slow baked evenings, to walk along the beach, baby girl in arms. It was peaceful then, and beautiful, but at the end of three weeks, I was more than ready to return home.
Claude dropped us at the bus station, and like a yoyo beginning its ascent back up the thread, we headed north again to Tel Aviv. We drove for an extended period through desert, and this time I was more aware of the scenery. While the mountains folded and wrinkled in ridges quite similar to those of my own Great Basin, the plant life was exotic, at least to my unlearned eye, with colors and shapes so novel it seemed that I was passing across the pages of a National Geographic article. As we passed from the Sinai Desert to the Negev Desert, the scenery became flatter and less extreme, and shortly thereafter the transition to coastal plain took us through grassland and rolling, shrub covered hills. This was more like it, I thought—green, pretty, all farms and fields. We passed roadside stands with flowers and vegetables, some no more than tiny pickups like Claude’s with crates in the back, and some more permanent structures. Then we rolled into the highly populated areas outside the city, with stops more and more frequent, and scenery less interesting.

Tel Aviv was a different place in the daylight. I hardly recognized the bench I’d spent the night on, and there was a tremendous rush and bustle of people and vehicles. The streets and cars were built on a much smaller scale, making the pace seem that much more frenetic. Even the traffic lights seemed to encourage the rush, with yellow warning drivers to prepare to start, not stop. Buses and taxis were far more numerous than I was used to. It was unusual, at least at that time, for an individual to own a car. Taxes and fees, as well as astronomical fuel costs, made it a financial impossibility for most. Thus the country had a well developed transportation system, with trains, taxis or busses easily accessible from nearly any point, and the downtown area of Tel Aviv was the nexus for all points, north or south.
It was necessary to add the baby to our passport, and to file papers with the U.S. embassy recording her birth. The formality of getting a passport photo of our tiny infant was amusing, until we found it might prevent us from catching our flight. We set out with an address in hand, hoping to be back in twenty minutes. Unfortunately, we had overlooked the fact that it was Friday afternoon and many businesses closed early to prepare for the Sabbath. We crossed back and forth through the tree lined streets of the central downtown area, sent first here and then there, looking for a photographer’s shop that was open. I had never seen such miniscule little shops, crammed with odd mixtures of merchandise and services. At last, by pure luck, we stumbled on a shop with its windows proclaiming “Studio Neumann” and offering postcards, Kodak film, photos and ice cream.

A grizzled, potbellied man with a heavy accent said yes, he could do passport photos, but he was closing. Desperate, we explained the situation. We had to be at the airport in four hours, the embassy was closing in an hour, and we had to have the photo for the passport. “I don’t have Polaroid. You need Polaroid,” he grumbled, lit another cigarette, and got out his equipment. He snapped two pictures of the sleeping baby and stepped through a curtain into his darkroom, presumably to develop and print. A while later he emerged, lit another cigarette, and engaged in some chit chat with David about his selection of postcards. He traveled around the country taking the photos himself, he said, and printing them as postcards. Then he disappeared again behind the curtain. He emerged again a few moments later, with photos in hand. We paid, thanked him profusely, and wished him “Shabbat Shalom,” a peaceful Sabbath. We hurried back to the embassy to complete the paperwork that would allow my daughter to travel with me.
There are times even now when I wonder how we managed to get away with doing what we did, how we could forge on so blindly without knowing anything, really, about where we were or what we were doing. Of course we made it home, and counted the trip a success. It appeared that our mission had been accomplished—our child had been born safely on Israeli soil, and David had made contact with people in the military equipment industry who might be interested in his idea. He’d taken a quick trip to Tel Aviv and other places north, and had spoken with representatives of certain companies, he said, receiving indications of interest and promises that someone would be in touch. It seemed all that was needed was to return home and finish the prototype, and he would have a ready market, perhaps even assistance in getting into production. We would emigrate just as soon as we had the finances to do so, settle there, and live happily and productively ever after.
CHAPTER 2

EXODUS

Despite the fact that we never heard from those companies, we continued to plan and prepare for emigration. We spent the next two years working, saving and finagling so that we could pack up and ship ourselves and our belongings off to that very foreign land. At the end of those years, we said goodbye to Vegas and drove across the U.S., through places more unknown to me than even far away Israel. We made a stop in Texas to visit the distant branches of David’s family, pushed down across the southern states, through Florida and up the East Coast. I’d never seen Texas, the Mississippi, the Gulf, or the deep green country of the southeast. The journey itself felt almost mystical—how else to describe the giant spider webs, stretched ten feet and more, thick as candy floss and glinting silver white in the early morning pines of Louisiana? Or the gloomy little town in the woods of Georgia with no sign of life but a raven swooping down to claim a piece of road kill?—and I had the sense then of leaving behind a country I ought to have known better.

When we boarded the plane in New York, I wasn’t sure I’d ever be back. However, I had no time for nostalgia, no time to notice the aircraft or much of anything else about the flight. I was now traveling with a toddler. Children can be great travelers, happy to do anything as long as they have your complete attention and a few favorite books to look at when they get tired of their surroundings. The key is that it really takes
your complete attention, no fudging or pretending to be engaged. Eventually my daughter slept, and I dozed off and on for several hours. I woke as dawn’s faint light was seeping in the portholes. There was a quiet chanting behind, and I looked back to see a minyan (Jewish prayer group) saying their morning prayers, slightly swaying and looking for all the world as if they were in the comfort of their home or synagogue rather than the aisle of an airplane. I could name the pieces of regalia they wore, I could explain why they stood in a group to pray, and what the group was called, but I still had a hard time not staring.

Had we considered why this flight had been the least expensive, we’d have been better prepared. Landing in the late afternoon, on the eve of Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, was not a good idea. The entire country literally closed down at sunset, and normal life did not resume until sunset on the next day. The terminal emptied out so quickly it was as if they’d all had word of a plague due to arrive at nightfall. Unaware of the sunset deadline, I stopped to change my daughter and feed her, and by the time we got outside, the last busses and sharoots—shared taxis—had departed. We went back in to enquire, only to find all the desks closed down; there were no services to be had, and no further flights scheduled in or out. The emptiness was eerie, in an almost post-apocalyptic kind of way. Outside, a head-shaking security agent suggested we call a taxi, although he didn’t think any would be available. He was incredulous that we planned to get to Eilat tonight. He walked away, still shaking his head.

Across the parking lot, we spotted a lone taxi. It was not in the regular passenger loading area, but David approached the driver anyway. After a lengthy negotiation, in which everything was “impossible!” they agreed on a price, an outrageous amount, and
we were on our way—almost. The driver went somewhat out of his way, about a twenty
minute detour, to pick up a friend who was willing to drive down and back with him.
They spoke occasionally together, but I couldn’t recognize any of the words. The roads
were nearly deserted, and grew more so as the night wore on. We stopped in Beersheba
for gas, at a station that was miraculously open. The driver climbed out and spoke with
the attendant, and we filled up and were on the way before I even thought about it. Why
would that gas station be open? Why would that driver be willing to drive all the way to
Eilat on Yom Kippur? Once again I had brushed up against the unseen nation within a
nation, but I could not see beyond the expected.

Our arrival at the hostel was ill timed, and in some way presaged the tone of our
stay there. Claude was surprised at the knock on the door, and answered it reluctantly.
Travel is one of the things forbidden on the Sabbath, and to travel on the High Holy Day
was, to judge by Valda’s expression, unforgivable. Nonetheless, they allowed us the same
room as we’d had before, and we were ‘home,’ at least temporarily.

The buildings of the hostel were 1960’s style, raw concrete, all angles and planes,
with splashes of vivid reds, blues and oranges on metal doors and railings. The rooms
were more like cells or barracks than a place one would imagine staying on a vacation—
twelve people to a room, no shelves, no tables, no chairs. There were sixteen regular
hostel rooms, and a half dozen ‘group’ rooms. The hostel rooms were for the regular
Euro-backpacking crowd, twelve to a room, concrete floors and walls, iron bunk beds in
two rows down a narrow walkway with enough room at the end of each bed to put two
backpacks on the floor. The group rooms were designed to hold perhaps a full busload of
youths or kibbutzniks—no beds, just mats on the floor.
Our room, built exactly the same as the regular hostel rooms—a long tri-level concrete hall about ten feet wide and twenty feet long—had been originally used for the kitchen help, since it was adjacent. It had only two bunk beds, instead of the usual six, which left us room to put a small plastic table and chairs. Over the next weeks, we settled in and went to work. David handled the registration desk at certain hours and did maintenance: plumbing, swamp coolers, whatever needed fixing. I cleaned rooms. The leap was extreme for me, from living in a suburban house with wall-to-wall carpeting and central air conditioning to mucking out concrete cells with a bucket and squeegee. I learned quickly enough—really, how much skill is needed to use a squeegee?—but I chafed under Valda’s constant criticism, and some other nagging discomfort that I couldn’t quite name.

On the surface, Israel is a very contemporary, western country—first world, one might say, plunked down in the middle of the third world. It has supermarkets, department stores, centralized transportation and health care systems. The cities have a slightly cosmopolitan, European air, reinforced by the fact that Israelis hail from all over the globe. In some areas, you’re as likely to find a sign in German or French as you are English, although there is a concerted effort to make sure every Israeli learns Hebrew. The resurrection of their ancient language is one of their proudest accomplishments. Economically speaking, it was quite a change from the middle class, white-bread world I grew up in. Wages were low, prices were high, and things that I had always taken for granted turned out to be luxuries. I learned to carry baskets to the store to grocery shop, because bags cost extra. Bottles, cans, paper and even egg cartons were recycled. Bread
came without wrappers, milk came in plastic bags, breakfast was tomatoes and cucumbers, and hot water remained stubbornly lukewarm.

I had been in the country for perhaps a month, and I was beginning to feel the edges of it all pressing in on me. Nothing was the same, or even bearable; everything grated on me like sand on glass. I was in the throes of a classic case of culture shock. Only those who have lived in a different country can fully appreciate the emotional turmoil that constant ‘difference’ brings. Living and working in a hostel exacerbated this feeling. The customers chatted with David, sharing stories and jokes, and played with Sufa, my daughter, speaking to her in their own language, playing children’s games that they probably had learned at their parents’ knees. While I was convinced that exposure to other cultures was a great thing for my daughter, this felt like both too much and too little. The people were merely passing through, looking for a bit of entertainment on their holiday. The connections were temporary and superficial, and increased my feelings of transience and isolation.

My main comfort was in the place itself. Walking along the beach that curved, marking the very end of the sea, I would look south down a long, desert valley filled nearly to the mountain’s edges with ocean, feeling the emptiness that pulled the breezes down, down the valley and out to sea. On the other side of this perfectly round bay, a scant mile away, was a border, another city, and another world. Aqaba, being Jordan’s sole ocean port, was a major gateway to the country. While Eilat relaxed and sunbathed, Aqaba was busy with commerce, pumping goods into the country’s heartland, and its highways were visible, especially at night, with the lights of trucks rolling in and out of port. Huge ships would arrive, spend a day or two, and then disappear back down the
gulf. It was utterly fascinating to me, having never been around a port. I would listen for the horns, and stop everything to watch the ships coming in.

Another element of Aqaba’s interest was its threat—that was a hostile country, right over there, just a stone’s throw away—and its forbidden, unknown aspect added to its mystique. Israeli patrol boats roamed up and down an imaginary line, trying to keep tourists from wandering too close to the border and becoming international incidents. Their Jordanian counterparts patrolled the other side of the imaginary line, and the waves and wind kept life interesting for both. Windsurf rentals were an active business in Eilat. Tourists, most of whom had never touched a board before, were given twenty minutes of instruction, warned where not to go and what marine life to avoid, and were turned loose on the living surface of the Gulf to flutter and splash. On days when the wind was blowing toward Jordan, the shops would discourage novices, since they were almost certain to wash up too close to the border.

We got the notice that our belongings had arrived in Haifa, at the port, and we made arrangements to be gone for a few days. We would go to Tel Aviv to apply for a change of visa status and then to Haifa. Once again, we rode the bus northward to the city. This was the point where things began to slide down hill. We were told we could not change our visa. No, we couldn’t just apply to emigrate. No, the information we had received from the embassy didn’t say that precisely, but it was understood. Only Jews move to Israel, and one must be Jewish to get true residency. Those who are not could get a special permit to live in the country, but they had to be sponsored, have proof of financial resources and proof that any prospective employer had a special need to employ them, having been unable to fill the position with a citizen. We met with further bad news
at the port: everything we shipped was taxable, with the exception of our truck and whatever was inside it, which could be released on our tourist visa—with a suitable deposit, of course. The total due, if we wished to bring our household goods, and the all-important prototype, into the country, was in the neighborhood of twelve thousand dollars, far more than any of it was worth. We retrieved the truck and returned to Eilat, suitably humbled but not beaten.

The truck was the key to our future plans. It was a monstrous, four-wheel-drive crew cab, dressed out in gung-ho western style—oversized tires, brush guards, spotlights—and all rigged up for back country travel. David had added bench seats and a shell to the back, and it would hold eleven paying passengers and their packs—although not very comfortably. He was going to run a sort of rough country Sinai tour. Once back in Eilat he set about getting it ready, and finding his first load of customers. The itinerary included Mt. Sinai, site of the burning bush, the monastery of Santa Caterina, as well as a number of beach destinations along the peninsula. The trip went according to plans; it was fun, it was profitable, and it suited his outgoing, theatrical nature. The next week he took two more trips, and the week after, two more. It seemed that the tours were going to be successful. David was elated.

Unfortunately, this turn of affairs had a negative impact on our status at the hostel. One evening, as we were cleaning out the truck from an overnighter, we were called on the carpet. Valda and Claude had understood that they would have a permanent full-time handyman/general-dog’s-body and maid in exchange for our room. David had assumed that a few days a week as handyman would be sufficient. Not so. To remain at the hostel would require a commitment of at least five days a week, they said, and we could not
advertise tours on the premises. Making matters worse, I was pregnant again, and my body was protesting having to make a hundred beds every day. I needed an easier job. That was the final straw, and Valda swooped in for the kill. Ah, well, then we would have to find another place to stay. This was a business, not a daycare center or a charity. The conversation ended badly as emotion took over, and the doors to the hostel were permanently closed to us.

It was the proverbial dark and stormy night as we packed up the truck, still not sure where we would go. We were loaded and ready to leave when I remembered one last item. I went back to the room to get my daughter’s potty while David took the key to Claude and made his farewells. We planned to sleep in the truck that night and find an apartment the next day; it seemed a good enough course of action, and there was no sense wasting money on a hotel when we had a perfectly good camper shell. However, this carefully crafted what-next-scenario fell apart when we returned to the truck to find it had been broken into while we were gone. The wallet with our passports and remaining cash was gone, along with any hope of getting our feet back under us. I sat in the truck, rocking my daughter and quietly crying while David stormed around outside, cursing and yelling. Finally, his anger vented, he drove us down to the beach and found a place to park for the night.

In the cold grey dawn our situation looked no better. We returned to where we had been parked, and David got out and searched the area several times over. He found a silver charm that had been in the wallet at the end of the asphalt. He continued up the wash and found first the passport, then the rest of the wallet. Even the worthless tourist visa was still intact; only the money was gone. Having the passport was a relief. It meant
that we could stay in Eilat, and not have to travel up country to get a replacement. The next step was to come up with a plan of action. We had burned the bridges with our families with the decision to leave the States. We had no-one in the country and no where to go now that we were on the outs with Claude and Valda. David had enough money in his pocket to fill the truck up with gas, which meant that he could make a Sinai run and net some cash, but if the baby and I went that would be two less seats, and less profit. Pragmatically—and rather heroically, I thought—I agreed to stay on the beach while he was gone.

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Shore Life

We set the tent up on the far end of the beach, where camping was allowed, and where there was less traffic. There were no shops or facilities, not even a bathroom for nearly a quarter mile, but it was clean and quiet, and there was a small playground several hundred yards west, with swings, a trash can and a water fountain. We set a plastic jerry can with water on a crate outside the door, filled the tent with the clothes and books that we had with us, and I laid my guitar case down along the side as a table. It was a cozy little nest, and my daughter settled right in, patting the sleeping bags and telling me to come read a book with her. She liked the ‘little house,’ and, after snuggling in with her, so did I.

The tent remained our home for over two months. David continued making run after run, sometimes to the Sinai, sometimes letting his passengers ‘charter’ a trip to Tel Aviv, Haifa, or anywhere else in the country they wanted to go. He enjoyed the people and the movement as much as I enjoyed the quiet of the beach. There was something
soothing about living in the tent. I loved the gentle slopes of its dome, the glow of candlelight through its fabric at night, and the rush of sun in the morning. I learned to throw a quilt over the top at midday to shade it and make it cooler, and to bank sand around its base to break the wind that rolled down the beach to the water, and how to heat water for my daughter’s bath by putting the jerry can on the sunny side. We lived the rhythms of the sun and the water, and I was happier than I’d been at the hostel, despite conditions, for my hours were spent with my daughter, and closer to nature than I’d ever lived. We combed the beach, picking up sea shells, which in her childish pronunciation came out ‘specials,’ and driftwood for the evening fire. I played and sang for her, and read to her each night by candlelight.

Yes, beach life had its beauties, like the constant murmur of the water’s liquid lullabies, walking an ever-changing shoreline, the exclamatory slap of fish reentering the water, driftwood fires lighting the night. However idyllic those moments, difficulties arose with regularity. For example, food was problematic. Without refrigeration there weren’t many things I could keep on hand. It was quite a distance into town, and leaving the tent unattended was not an option, so we had to wait for David to come back and bring us groceries. Each day my daughter and I would scout the beach for bottles and cans, building up a small bank of the precious commodities. Other campers or tourists weren’t concerned with the paltry half-shekel returns, and usually we could amass enough to buy a few days worth of groceries, mostly bread and peanut butter or chocolate spread. It was a poor diet, despite being liberally fortified with fresh air and sunshine.

And, on occasion, nature got a little too close. One evening, after a particularly beautiful sunset, a storm came in from the south. At first, I just hunkered down in the
blankets, attempting to ignore it. After a while, I couldn’t. The tent was being buffeted by wild gusts and spray from waves that were reaching higher and higher. The whole damn gulf was going to end up in the tent if I didn’t move it. Near panic, I unloaded everything from the tent except my sleeping child and the bedding, dragged it perhaps six or seven yards higher, away from the water, and loaded everything back in it to weigh it down. I fell asleep to the sound of the gulf waters railing against the shore and the fabric of the tent crackling and straining in the wind. Of course, the next day was perfect, and the water was so far away that I dragged the tent back down, although not quite as near the water as before.

An onslaught of a different sort attacked from the east a few days later. I woke one morning to a strange scratching sound on the back side of the tent. Sticking my head out to see what it was, I was horrified to see not a trail, but a superhighway of ants, flowing east to west. It was a river of reddish black, composed of one main arterial and several tributaries. Just the edge of one of the small branches was crossing the back corner of my tent, and it was the sound of all those ant legs walking across the taught fabric that I had heard. This branch had a span of about six inches across, considerably smaller than the big one, but still more ants than I ever imagined existed, let alone traveled in a group.

Ants, as far as I knew, did not migrate: they dug holes, went foraging and dragged the food back to their little tunnels. Yes, they had paths, and they’d sting if you got in the way, but you could always spray their path with water (or bug spray) and they’d stop using it. This mass movement was far beyond anything I’d ever seen. I stood frozen for a moment, unable to decide what to do. I could move the tent, but first I had to get my
daughter out of there. Problem was, where would be safe? What if the flow changed? What if they went crazy when I disturbed them? What if they followed the tent? I backtracked the tributary about ten yards and, using a plastic shovel from the toy beach set, I slipped it under the steady moving stream, trying to lift and turn the path further up the beach. A few scattered, but the rest took the hint and obligingly changed their direction by a few degrees. I had created a ripple in the flow! I moved closer to the tent and made another change, and then another. The river was gradually deflected, and soon was several feet away. Within an hour, the flood was past. I had no idea where they were going or why, but I really hoped they wouldn’t be coming back.

The waves rolling and swooshing onto the beach or splish-pocking against uneven stone filled the soundtrack of our days. Just up the beach from our camp was a rock jetty built out into the water. It was the perfect place to clamber around and get acquainted with the wildlife of the gulf. Fish lurked in the shadows of the rocks, shellfish, starfish and other sticky things clung to the rocks themselves, and seabirds used them for perching, preening, and sunning. The tide rose up and fell back, depositing new things to study in the jetty’s pools and crevices, and the first hours of the day were often spent climbing and poking around it.

One morning, rather early, I noticed a man throwing something large into the water from the jetty. He came back that afternoon and retrieved it. He repeated the process for a couple of days before I found out what he was doing. He had built a trap of wire and metal, and was ‘fishing’ while he was at work. It was on an evening when David was with us, and had the fire going. He and the man struck up a conversation, and the man was soon grilling his fish on the fire, and they were sharing construction
anecdotes and travel stories. The fellow’s name was Musa, which at the time meant nothing to me. He said he was from a town called El Halil, but he’d been to America, been to Europe. He spoke a funny accented English, had a wife and family at home, and was in Eilat working on one of the hotel expansions. He was saving money by camping out, so that he’d have more to take home to his family. He’d been in Eilat for two months, and he missed his children badly.

Musa stopped by each day after that to say hello to my daughter, never staying, but greeting her solemnly, and occasionally offering her a candy or a piece of fruit. One day I asked him about the fish, and whether they could be caught with a hook, or if it required a trap. I was tired—beyond tired—of bread, and craving protein. He shared that day’s catch with us, showing me how to clean and cook the little fish. There was only a mouthful or two to each one, but it was a savory treat. A few days later, he stopped by and left his trap, saying he thought I could make use of it. He was going home to his family and his orchard. He extended an invitation to visit if we ever made it to El Halil, giving his name and family name in full, and an address that to me didn’t sound like an address at all—the house of Abu so-and-so, in the valley of apple trees. Of course I had no idea where El Halil was, but thanked him for both the trap and the invitation.

A few days later, David’s impromptu charter service finally caught the eye of the authorities. He was not licensed as a business or tour guide, nor was he a resident or a taxpayer. Just what did he think he was doing? They ordered him to cease, and threatened him with seizure of the vehicle, fines and arrest. It seemed like a good time to be moving on. He found one more load of paying customers interested in leaving Eilat. Some wanted
to go to Tel Aviv, others to Haifa and Jerusalem. We packed up the tent, shaking out the sand, and set off for the north.

The wandering life had some rewards. For a week or two in Haifa we parked on a small residential street, near a park and below the windows of a music conservatory. The park provided water and restrooms, and the conservatory gave me my first taste of live classical music. I listened spellbound as various groups played, and once heard what must have been an entire orchestra. Haifa, a jewel of a city on a hill, was far gentler than Eilat, or even my native Vegas. Green and park like, it flowed down the mountainside, each stopping place giving a different view of a beautiful moon-shaped bay. The water was ever changing, murky gray, blue-green, smooth or white capped, and it was filled with shipping traffic of all shapes and sizes. Around its edge were industrial buildings and crane covered docks, their huge size and unfamiliar outlines seeming wildly exotic to me. David tried contacting the companies he had spoken with before, tried finding work, and finally resorted again to ‘unofficial’ charters of the truck, and it was time to move on, south again.

Wherever we went, David found people who were going there. Even if he didn’t have paying passengers, he would pick up hitchhikers, and pass the time chatting with them. Unlike the U.S., where it was considered dangerous to either hitch or pick riders up, in Israel it was a perfectly acceptable mode of getting around. Young folks in the military were the most common hitchhikers, materializing at highway junctions with their hand flung down, pointing at the ground beside them, rifles dangling. Their assignments often required them to report to different places around the country, but they weren’t supplied with the means to get there. It was either take the bus or hitch. Israelis would
pick up these soldiers and go far out of the way to deliver them to their destination, as a way of doing a good deed for both an individual and the country. Still, it seemed odd to me to see hitchhikers with a weapon slung casually over the shoulder, fully confident that someone would pull over for them.

We set up camp for a while in Tel Aviv, nestling the tent on a quiet stretch of beach, and David found a few paying charters. It was a cold, unfriendly beach, the sand hiding clumps of tar from oil spills, and the wind blowing constantly off the Mediterranean. I always worried, since it was such a busy place, that the officials would come and tell me to move sometime while David was gone. I was left alone, though, and our time there was uneventful.

On one of his trips out of the area, David picked up a young American couple, and they chatted and exchanged information. They were Mormons from Utah, going back to Jerusalem after a trip to Tel Aviv. David learned from them that they were living in the country on a 'temporary resident' visa. It had been no problem to get, they said, and it had allowed them to bring their household goods into the country without paying duty. Of course, they had to account for every single item and take it with them when they left, but just knowing there was a way, or at least a possibility, was immensely cheering. We struggled through another few weeks in Tel Aviv, and finally had a small nest-egg saved beyond our immediate needs for food and fuel. The plan was to get a cheap apartment and apply for one of those visas. We broke camp, found some paying passengers, and headed for Jerusalem.
CHAPTER 3

COMING TO THE MOUNTAIN

There are those who believe that the end of the world will begin in a specific place, a valley near Jerusalem. I lived for a while on Jebel Mukaber, where, if the doomsayers were right, and my timing different, I could have dangled my feet in the river of blood destined to flow down from the Holy City. Rising across the Kidron Valley, south and east of Jerusalem, Mukaber is a stately, round-shouldered old mountain, a link in the limestone chain surrounding the city. This chain of mountains is, geographically speaking, the backbone of the country. It juts up through the center, running lengthwise from the narrow, green north to the sandy south. Jerusalem is the heart, sheltered within the arms of hills that curve about each other in graceful rolls and ridges.

These mountains effectively divide the land, east from west, desert from coast: a single natural division in a place of so many political divisions. On the west side, the land drops down to the Mediterranean, plains rich for farming, moist with ocean touched breezes. The eastern drop off is a rapid descent into the white hot oven of the Jordan Valley, resting place of the Dead Sea, the place where Lot’s wife was turned to stone, and the lowest land elevation on the planet. On this eastern side the desert begins, a stretch of sand and stone one can easily envision running all the way to the vast Empty Quarter of the Arabian Peninsula. No wonder people have been struggling all these millennia for space up on the hills.
After a brief while in Tel Aviv, we arrived in Jerusalem on a Saturday. We had been invited to attend a ‘branch meeting’ by the young Mormon couple David had met. Although neither of us were Mormon, we were familiar with the church, each having family members who had joined it. We went to the service, and it felt good to hear English spoken in plain American accents, to see people scrubbed up and in their Sunday finest. It was so different from how we’d been living. The couple offered me a place to stay while David made his next tour run, and I spent almost a week reveling in the luxuries of electric lights and running water, and, most of all, being able to stand upright while getting dressed—something that can’t be done in a small tent. Then my husband came back to collect me.

I was truly reluctant to leave. I was near my eighth month, and the stress of constantly moving and camping was wearing on me. Still, I silenced my doubts, although I couldn’t help looking back as we drove away from their warm little apartment. Who knew when I’d have such comfort again? We crested a ridge and turned down a narrow road that hugged a curving mountainside. Camp had been established on the empty hillside: three tents, the truck, and an oddball collection of people gathered around a small wood fire. Every traveler you meet, particularly in far flung places, is a story, and David had a rare talent for collecting them. I had met the two Canadian backpackers, Orloff and Ray, already; they had ‘chartered’ the truck for the last week and run south to Eilat and the Sinai. New additions were an Israeli pickpocket and two Danish girls, all heading back north after a holiday on the sunny beaches of the Sinai Peninsula.

In late afternoon light, the tent looked almost welcoming. Perched on the only flat spot on an otherwise merciless slope, my front door unzipped to a spectacular view-- the
skyline of Jerusalem, City of Peace, the Holy City, stretched out before me. The sky began turning golden red, sunset glowing on the massive stone walls, highlighting the exotic arches, domes and globes of eastern architecture; it was entrancing, and I sat, drinking it all in, until dark.

With the fall of night came the wind, whirling and gusting, driven by a storm off the coast. I shivered in my sleeping bag all night, my daughter tucked up against the round bulk of my belly, expecting a gust to tear the tent apart at any moment. In the morning we broke camp. The Danish girls went in search of regular lodging, the Israeli left for Tel Aviv, and Ray and Orloff quarreled over which of them was actually the Witness (something to do with the return of Christ), the outcome of which caused Ray to depart for places unknown. With this much reduced company, we began searching for a better campsite.

Exploration proved this mountain unique among its brethren, capped as it was with a ring of pine trees dense enough to seem like a forest. The remainder was nearly bare, sparsely inhabited in comparison to the jumbled mosaic of humanity visible on the other hillsides, which were all completely covered with high rises, gravestones, or houses. Behind the pines, at the mountain’s highest point, was a fenced compound, a huge area with a well guarded gate, and a sign in several languages, carefully lettered in UN blue, warning all vehicles they must stop at the gate.

Following the narrow strip of road that circumnavigated the mountain’s shoulder, we spotted a sheltered nook in a fold of the hill. In this little cove, spring had come. Grass was up; trees were blooming. Remnants of a barbed wire fence traced the boundaries, but the greenery was the most obvious marker: no other area on that mountain, or any of the
others visible, shared its tender green color. The plot was below road level, almost hidden. We accessed it by following a circuitous path that began in a crease of the hill, picked its way past one slide area, wandered around and veered out in several directions once it met the lower levels. On one of these levels was a perfectly shaped tree, an apricot or peach, I thought at first. I buried my face in the brilliant white blossoms, remembering the trees of home. Under its shelter we pitched the tent.

There are many proverbs concerning the luck of fools, and I can vouch for their truth. We had come, all those months before, to live in Israel. We had read books and newspapers, watched television reports, studied Jewish culture and religion, learned a few phrases of Hebrew, and thought ourselves better informed than most of our compatriots. It is safe to say I knew more about Israeli history than I’d ever bothered to learn about my own. I had pored over biographies of Israeli generals and presidents, accounts of politics and social developments, wars and ignominious terrorist attacks. Of course we knew about the dangers facing Israel, the constant threat of hostile Arab countries sweeping in to annihilate the valiant little state. The one detail we missed was a rather significant one. Underneath the modern nation of Israel was a second country, another completely separate people and culture that somehow shared the same physical dimension. We arrived on the West Bank without the slightest idea that we were there.

Our campsite was almost idyllic. About an acre in size, the lot was terraced, with trees of the domestic sort scattered about: fig and mulberry, olive, almond and apricot, a few grape vines dormant along the fence line. On the main level were the remains of a home. Rounded stone walls faced out from a row of rooms dug into the mountain, each one with a pair of small barred windows, like dark, empty eyes staring out. The stones of
the walls, covered in mosses of varying shades of grey and green, blended organically into the mountain. Tiny door openings, which stepped down to what were once concrete floors, let out a dank, moldy odor. Old tin cans and broken chairs bore evidence of former occupants, but now, with the passage of time and relentless weather, the ceilings were falling. The earth was bearing down, slowly refilling the hollowed spaces. In front of the rooms was a broad area paved unevenly with stone and bits of concrete, grasses and flowers coming up between. At the end of the line stood a less graceful but sturdy construction of concrete, a single room with a wide iron-barred window and narrow wooden door.

On the afternoon of our third day camped there, we were hailed by a voice from the roadway. The young man spoke in Hebrew, with a decidedly hostile tone. Although we didn’t understand the words, the meaning was clear: we were trespassing, and he was warning us off. The only Hebrew we could manage in the situation was a ‘sorry, we don’t speak Hebrew’ kind of thing. He stood a moment looking us over—the tent under the tree, laundry strung on its branches, my daughter obliviously picking flowers.

“English?” he ventured. At the affirmative he said, “What you are doing here?”

“Camping.”

He spoke again in Hebrew, but frustrated with our blank looks, waved his arms, said something else unintelligible, and left. A short while later, a column of people filed down a path from the neighboring section. Several children led the way, chattering to each other. The young man we had seen earlier had brought a companion, apparently to bridge the language gap. A thin teenaged girl with a knee length braid carried a tray with cups and a huge teapot, followed by two young women and an older one, bringing up the
procession. The group divided in two, men one way, women and children the other, the former going to speak with David and Orloff, the latter wending toward the tent where I’d been reading with my daughter.

My first thought was that these must be Gypsies. The color and noise were overwhelming. An older woman, the obvious matriarch, wore an ankle length skirt in a bright flowered print, long sleeved blouse in a completely different color scheme, and a white chiffon scarf, knotted tightly under her chin. The next oldest women wore embroidered caftan-style dresses and colorful scarves. The school age girls wore jeans with tunic length shirts. They spoke animatedly between themselves, and when they reached a few yards away, the older woman hallooed, much as one would imagine a sea captain doing as his vessel approached another.

The moment of meeting is always the same, though never quite comfortable. This quality of sameness makes it possible to meet someone with whom you share neither culture nor language, and still understand each other and be at least marginally polite. To this day, I’ve no idea what was said, but greeted them as best I could. The woman spoke directly to me, unhesitating, as though it was a given that I would comprehend. After refusing my invitation to sit in the tent, which undoubtedly smelled a little ripe after months of steady habitation, she settled herself in a sunny spot, patted the ground beside her to indicate that I should sit, and reached for the teapot.

Of course they were not Gypsies; they were Palestinians, but it took me many years and the eventual return to my own country to fully understand what that meant. To my amusement, some time later one of the girls confessed to thinking the same about
us—that we were Gypsies, that is—and certainly her assessment was probably nearer the mark.

For a few moments we were engaged in the drinking of tea, its give and take, please and thank you. The tea itself was powerfully sweet, strongly flavored with mint and lukewarm. The younger girls all spoke some English, and practiced their textbook how are you’s and what is your name’s, giggling over each other’s questions until the woman shushed them. She chose the eldest girl to speak for her, and began to ask a series of questions: who were we, where were we from, and so forth. The translation required frequent consultation between the girls, and debate between them took longer than either question or answer. Then the interview was done. She rose, gathered her clan and left, but not until they had made sure I understood I was to visit their house the next day, and to bring my daughter.

I did, and in short order it became a ritual. Instead of driving in to the nearest gas station a mile or so away and in the nearest Israeli neighborhood to fill our jerry cans with water, I would walk the quarter mile to their house, visit, drink tea, and carry back a can of water. I realized that they were making a special effort to see that my daughter had a good meal every time she went, and soon she was clamoring to see ‘the friends’ at every opportunity. The children would scoop her up to join in their play the moment we arrived, and she picked up a few more words each time she went. She was able to communicate within days.

My progress was slower. I began learning names, the courtesies, foods. The younger girls tried to speak English with me, but since they were usually at school when I arrived, communication between the lady of the house and myself proceeded in Arabic,
since she spoke not a word of English. Although my tongue tripped frequently over unfamiliar sounds, she was unremittingly patient, teaching me naturally and slowly. She spoke with me in simple terms, repeating phrases, like one speaks with a young child, and eventually everyone else followed suit. Her title was Im Mazin, mother of Mazin, a respectful equivalent of Mrs. or Madame. David, unable to un-anglicize his tongue, christened her Mamasan, and it became, after a brief explanation, an acceptable substitute for her proper title—became, in fact, an affectionate nickname and something that her family liked to tease her about, saying things like “Mamasan, your other daughter is here,” and “If you are Mamasan, then that must mean our father is Babasan, right?” She was unperturbed, and would answer, “Fine, then open the door,” and “Yes, I guess he is, isn’t he?”

She was solid and strong, and she needed to be, for her work was unending and heavy. Hers was a very full house, with herself and her husband, seven children and a daughter-in-law, tightly quartered with little space or privacy. There were only two bedrooms, and the smaller of these had been given to Mazin when he married. Everyone else rolled mattresses out on the floor in either the other bedroom or the liwan—location depending on gender. Mamasan was a no-frills, no-nonsense kind of woman, but tender with small children and animals. She kept chickens and goats to provide eggs and yogurt, made massive quantities of bread daily, and kept a bountiful garden in the summer. She washed clothes by hand for nearly a dozen people, managed her family with an eye to what was good and proper, and kept an eye on those living in the immediate neighborhood who needed looking after. To this list she added my daughter and myself. When she saw that I had begun cutting and sewing baby clothes from one of David’s t-
shirts, she went to her neighbors on the mountain and gathered a layette of hand-me-downs, so that the new baby would have clothes and blankets.

Abu Mazin was a school administrator in the Arab school system, and the eldest son, Mazin, worked on the Israeli side as a medical aide. Mazin dreamed of having his own business, of not having to go each day to be subjected to the verbal abuse that was heaped on him by both his employers and the patients. His young wife, Wafa, was pregnant with her first child. They wished more than anything to be able to fix up the old house at the bottom of Abu Mazin’s land so they could move out and have their own place. Emad and Mohammed, both in their twenties, worked part time at whatever came along, and Iman, the eldest girl, was studying to pass her exit exams from high school. She was quite short, but had a don’t-mess-with-me attitude that helped her keep her siblings, even the older boys, in line and in gear. She was also responsible for helping her mother with the mountains of cooking and laundry. Ilham was tall and lean, with a river of shining, straight dark hair. She spoke the most English of any of the women, and was not afraid to use it. She seemed older than her years both because of her height and her faultless composure, but she was only in middle school, around eighth grade. Farouk, the youngest boy, and Maha, the youngest girl, were just far enough apart and just different enough to fight without end, but they were miserable and bored if they were separated.

I learned the patterns of the house almost unconsciously. Women used the kitchen door, except for formal visits, and sat at the kitchen table. One didn’t converse with the men, but boys were okay. The men kept out of the kitchen, for the most part, although there was a constant to and fro with the tea kettle and coffee pot. The children would argue over whose turn it was to carry the tea out to the veranda, where the men sat. The
eldest girls were almost never asked to carry the tea out, only to make it. Some things were not so easy to adapt to—sickeningly sweet tea, the loudness of voices in normal conversation, the strange plumbing and horrendous odor of the bathroom, which so unnerved me I preferred using the bushes at our campsite. Nor was I, an only child and very much used to my own company, comfortable with ebb and flow of people and constant activity in a large family. When the hubbub threatened to overwhelm me, I would make excuses and return to the peace and silence of the mountainside.

As the time for birth grew closer, climbing in and out of the tent grew nearly impossible, so I cleaned out the tiny concrete room with the big window, and settled in. This was problematic for our neighbors, for while camping in a tent was one thing, and arguably temporary, actually moving into the building was another, and demonstrated the intention to live there. Since they had been designated caretakers of the property when its owners evacuated during the '67 war, and had no way to guarantee that we weren’t Jewish ‘settlers’ come to take the land, although they seemed to believe that we weren’t, we were called to the neighbors house for a meeting. The discussion sparked by this was the beginning of my understanding of what I can only designate ‘the situation’, the answerless quandary of the West Bank. It was one of the few times I sat on the veranda with the men, and the conversation was conducted mainly in English. Abu Mazin, his oldest sons, a few neighbors and other representatives of the absent owners quizzed my husband about what he intended to do, explained their concerns, and determined that the proper course of action was to contact the owners and ask permission to stay on their property. It was a good short term solution for me; it meant I didn’t have to go back to sleeping in the tent.
Within a week my son was born, summoned into the world on a blue spring night by the call to evening prayer. My husband was at hand to help, and he took the news of a successful birth to Orloff, who’d set a tent up and was camping on the roof of the little shack. Orloff was more nervous than either my husband or myself, and had spent the afternoon pacing like a nervous cat. Relieved, he went to share the news with the neighbors, and within a quarter hour Mamasan and the girls arrived, bringing hot milk and soup and a kerosene lamp to replace the candles we’d been using. With a flock of women in the tiny room, my spouse retreated to the roof with Orloff. Mamasan unwrapped the baby, pronounced him beautiful, rewrapped him ‘properly’, and handed him to the girls to take turns holding, all the while exhorting me to eat and drink. I watched nervously as they passed the baby back and forth, until I finished my soup and milk and could gesture for his return. Satisfied that all was well, Mamasan corrected my nursing technique, wished me good night, and told me to bring him over the next day for a bath, once the sun was up and the day had warmed.

At his bath the next day, Mamasan showed me the ‘right’ way to care for a baby. She cradled him, one-handed, over the bathroom sink, and scrubbed his little body with a new sponge, buffing and polishing until he glowed pink and started to fuss. She wrapped him in towels, and laid him next on the bed, giving him a vigorous massage with olive oil, rubbing and straightening and massaging his limbs and trunk in smooth, rapid motions, then quickly dressing and wrapping him tightly in blankets before he could chill. The final touches were a swipe of kohl across each eye and a small blue amulet pinned to the blanket. The effect was strange and unnerving—stark black eye make-up on
a newborn—but she assured me it was important, since the kohl would prevent eye
infections, and the amulet would ward off anything bad.

The baby’s name changed, over the course of the next week, when Mamasan said
no, she couldn’t pronounce that English name, so she would call him Omar. The name
and the mountain have a history, or at least a story. The Arab Caliph Omar Ibn El
Khattab had once camped there, on his way to conquer Jerusalem. His was one of the
kinder victories, accomplished without bloodshed, through treaty. He established Islamic
rule over the city, but placed in effect safeguards to protect the rights, places and
properties of the resident Christians and Jews. It was said he was touched by the beauty
of the view from the mountain.
CHAPTER 4

ORIGINS AND DESTINATIONS

On the plane the attendants had given everyone small forms to fill out for their visa, and I'd marked ‘tourism, travel’ as my reason for being there, but now I was second guessing myself. That hadn’t been a good answer before; what if it caused them to refuse me entry? There weren’t really any other options though. I certainly wasn’t coming to live or on commercial business. I stood in line at the port of entry, hemming and hawing, trying to find a fast line—my reason being that if it was fast the clerk wasn’t asking a lot of questions—and switching back and forth several times. I thought I’d hit the jackpot when I found a spot behind a couple of the southern pilgrims. I figured I’d blend in and perhaps be taken for one of their group, but the tour leader spotted them and whisked them away to the line reserved for group tours. On my own again, with nerves mounting, I took a deep breath, wiped my palms on my pants, and rehearsed what I’d say when they started to quiz me. I was called forward; the clerk took the little paper, checked my passport, and asked my destination. Eilat, I said. She stamped me into the country. I was in. She never even responded to my thanks. Next!

I claimed my bag and passed through the ‘nothing to declare’ lane of customs, out to the central lobby. I was planning to take either a shared taxi or the bus into Jerusalem, but I wanted to call and let the family know I was in, and on my way up to the city. I had a phone number, but no phone token, and no Israeli money to buy one. Money changing
is a big business, and although the banks are where you’re supposed to change
currency—there’s a close bond between banks and government—it’s a well known fact
that they give the worst rates. Reluctantly, I changed a hundred, knowing I was getting
ripped off, but figuring I’d spend a good chunk on the taxi, and went to get a phone
token. Proud of myself—I’d remembered about the tokens—I went to the bank of phones
to call. Another oversight: instructions on the phone were all in Hebrew. I put the token
in and dialed. The recording was in Hebrew, and none of it familiar. I tried several times,
pushing different buttons, but each with the same result. Disgusted, I decided I’d just
have to show up ay the door without calling. I’d catch the first public transportation going
to Jerusalem, and once there I could find my way back to the mountain, even if I had to
walk.

I asked about busses at a desk, and the woman pointed at a door on the far side. I
exited the terminal and began hunting for a sign, or a bus or taxi labeled Jerusalem. It
seemed to me that fewer signs were in English than before, although I figured I could still
read it once I found it, no matter if it was Hebrew or Arabic. I walked up and down, back
and forth across the traffic islands and dividers, but the layout was completely dissimilar
to the travel-friendly airports I was used to—unsigned and unorganized, it didn’t seem to
make any sense. And the people were just as unhelpful, I decided, after I stopped and
asked someone if they spoke English. With an irritable shake of the head he said “no” in
Hebrew and turned away. Ah, yes, I’m here again. I decided to go back into the terminal
and wander from desk to desk until I got intelligible directions. As I neared the door, a
voice called me by name, and then repeated it, adding “Hey, where you are going?”
Unbelieving, I turned. It was Mohammed, sent to fetch me home.
We talked as we drove up to the city, me asking about the family and conditions here, Mohammed quizzing me about David, my kids and family. I gave him the bare bones—marriage ended, work, school, the very American life I lived—and found myself uncomfortable suddenly with the turns my life had taken. I didn’t want to talk about me. I wanted to hear about the family, about Mamasan, about the mountain. I wanted to hear from a real live source that things were not as bad as I had imagined, but as I listened I heard a new bitterness in Mohammed. His English was once surprisingly good, but now it proceeded out of him rusty and hesitant, like it had been unused for some time. He had always been the playful one, quick with a joke or to lighten the conversation. He spoke now as though tired; he had no hope to offer.

"By Heaven, it’s all bad. The people, the country, the situation—nothing is good."

"Do you ever think of leaving, maybe to Europe or America?"

"I cannot leave." He didn’t elaborate, but I understood. Only by their perseverance and determination had the Palestinians maintained a presence here. No matter how bad the situation was, leaving was not to be considered, since it would mean the loss of everything—identity, homeland, family and history. Those who left didn’t return. Night fell as we drove, climbing up from the coastal plain and into the hills. The highway traffic remained heavy, though. Apparently a lot of people commuted in to Tel Aviv or Jerusalem from outlying communities.

"It seems busier now," I commented. "More people and cars."

"Yes, it is more busy. Everybody rushes, but they don’t go anywhere."

"The mountains are still beautiful, though," I said, switching to Arabic.

"You still speak Arabic!" He replied in the same language.
“Yes, as badly as ever. I even took a class at school. It didn’t help. I still don’t speak well.”

Mohammed laughed. “You still sound like a peasant. By heaven,” he said, “that’s really something.” He seemed pleased, though, as we drove on in silence.

Al Ajnabeeya

I knocked tentatively on the heavy metal of Mamasan’s kitchen door. It was a battered blue-green, not quite matching the window frames, which were a vivid electric blue, a surprising splash of color against the creamy limestone of the walls. Blue is a very good color to paint these openings, I was told, for it protects against the evil eye. Protection, particularly in the form of doors and gates, is a priority in an unstable environment, and most of those on Arab houses are massively thick, double bolted, armor-like. Mamasan’s double door had a small window behind an intricate wrought-iron grille. A shape appeared behind the textured glass, the little window swung open a crack, and Maha’s voice shattered the afternoon quiet. How did such a tiny girl have so much yell packed away?

“Yama! Adjat al ajnabeeya!” She threw back the bolt with a clang and opened the door, ushering us in with the usual phrases of welcome, and took my daughter off to play. I was still puzzling over what she had said, having heard her use the phrase a number of times before. My ears were finally breaking the syllables into meaningful parts. “Yama” was a nickname for mother, like calling “Mom!” “Adjat” had something to do with arriving, and ‘al’ meant ‘the’—basic words, which I was getting a handle on.

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Mamasan bustled in to the kitchen and greeted us. Her hair, slicked back with water, showed she had just been at prayer. She rolled out the proper greetings, and I answered with the correct formulas, returning them. I had to ask about the phrase, still ringing in my head.

“What means ajnabeeya’?“

“What?”

“Maha say, just a little ago, ‘adjat al ajnabeeya.’ What means?”

“Maha said that, eh?” She thought about how to explain it, keeping her Arabic as simple as possible so that I could grasp what she was saying. “You’re not from here. You’re not an Arab. You’re ajnabeeya.”

“Ajnabeeya, not Americaneeya?”

“Americaneeya, yes. But not Arabeeya. You come here from outside. You are ajnabeyah.”

There was something telling in that moment. I wasn’t really me; I was suddenly representative of the foreign, the outsider. I was clearly identified as one of ‘them,’ rather than as one of ‘us’ or as myself.

With the birth of my son, it gave people on the mountain something new to call me. I became Im Omar, and the irony of the very Arabic name and my very foreign self was always good for a chuckle. I heard myself referred to as ‘al ajnabeeya’ in later conversations and elsewhere, usually when it was assumed I didn’t understand. Words say so much more than can be easily translated; one noun, one verb more or less and our estimation of a person or situation is impacted permanently, for better or worse. They were Arabs, and I was a foreigner—a tagline, shorthand, almost an epithet—a simple
brief way to describe the otherness, the opposition of us versus them. We talk about Arabs, in the west, in a similar way. I don’t see how it’s possible. There’s way too much variety to be encompassed by a simple word. I found, village to village and even from family to family, such huge variations in traditions, manners and mores, language and politics that, to my way of understanding, a broad brushstroke like “Arab” is practically meaningless. Except, perhaps, between us and them.

Cosmetic Differences

I felt compelled to spend as much time at the hospital as I could. Conversation lately had been about the fact that the doctors wanted to send Mamasan home once she had finished the current course of radiation. Reading between the lines, it didn’t sound hopeful. I went down by Ilham’s house to let her know I was going; she was preparing to leave for school, and trying to get her children ready as well.

“Why you don’t ask my father or Mohammed to drive you there? I think one of them is going today.”

“No, but thanks anyway.” I had ridden with Mohammed, first on the way in from Tel Aviv, and then again on a trip to the hospital. The combination of many small cars crowding on very small roads and aggressive driving by all parties brought out my best white-knuckle response. Public transportation, despite the risks, sounded pretty safe in comparison. I wished her a good day at work, and took the path up the hill to the road.

Once on the road, the view was unobstructed and beautiful. The Peace Forest had matured, although it still looked like the vast artificial monoculture that it was, and the new promenade the Israelis had built was quite lovely, a curving, sinuous structure built
of white Jerusalem stone, hugging the mountain ridge and providing a clear view of the
city. I’d almost reached the junction at the mountain’s ridge when I heard a car coming
up from behind. I stopped and stood as close to the edge as I dared while it passed. The
downhill side was a twenty foot drop, the other a ten foot bank, and there was neither
sidewalk nor shoulder—just a strip of dirt about as wide as my feet between the thin strip
of blacktop and the air. A pedestrian pretty much had to hope the driver would see them
and keep to the center. I had walked up this street with several of the children—some
Ilham’s, some Wafa’s—and they had told me about the child that had been hit on their
way to school, and how when the tanks had driven down the road a big piece of the
pavement had crumbled and fallen. Of course, they’d also told me about the wolf that one
of them saw one day, which seemed unlikely. The hills were so heavily populated now I
doubted that any of the wildlife I had once seen would ever visit again.

I caught an Israeli bus at the ridge, digging through unfamiliar coins for the
correct amount while the driver whipped back out into traffic. The public transportation
system generally works well; plenty of busses, routes and stops and inexpensive fares that
make getting around, at least on the Israeli side, fairly simple. The bus filled and emptied
in waves: gregarious groups of kids on the way to school, adults going to work. I reached
up and untied my scarf, wrapping it around my hands. Since I wore it in the Arab style, it
caused Israelis to do a double-take, but I was invisible once I took it off. Invisible was
something I could never manage to be on the Arab bus, scarf or no scarf. Watching for
my transfer point, I found that I could still phonetically sound out Hebrew street signs
and shop window ads, although I couldn’t actually read them. I was put off by the ads, at
least the graphic component: the photos were weird, the colors strange and the aesthetics
seemed utterly different, even unappealing. I puzzled a long time over a poster that featured a dog defecating. It was plastered all over the city, and I had no idea what it might be advertising, since I couldn’t read the text.

And yet, everywhere I looked were echoes of my own culture. Name brands from America, shopping malls in the best American style, references to American people and places, music and movies, McDonalds, pizza shops, over sized American cars, flat American accents. But there were goods from Europe as well, and other languages, values and aesthetics at work. I wondered about the strange combinations formed by the ‘melting-pot factor’ within Israeli culture, and what it must be like for children here who can pick and choose from an international array of influences and still call it their own.

Then, in contrast, a religion and culture that demand absolute obedience, whose existences depend on maintaining and reinforcing a particular identity. Similar pressures are placed on the Arab youth, similar demands are made, and added to that are the pressures of their political and economic oppression. Childhood is all too brief, and far too troubled, and these conditions breed a hardness in the soul, a weary bitterness that makes peace, understanding, or even small concessions surpassingly difficult.
CHAPTER 5

LEARNING THE MOUNTAIN

Lengthening days and increased warmth brought a complete change to the face of Mukaber. No longer stark white, it turned a rich, new green almost overnight. It seemed miraculous to me. Born and raised in the Mojave Desert, where anything lush is either casino landscaping or a trick of the light, I found this sudden greening, and the volunteer 'lawn' now thickening across the campsite, a wonder. On closer inspection it also proved deceptive, for as inviting as it looked, it concealed thorns, and the earth beneath the tender greens was stone-hard and dry. But still, it was beautiful, a carpet of sweet grasses punctuated with bright red poppies and tiny yellow and white flowers. Even the thorns were beautiful—tall purple thistles and craggy white ones, alive with bees and other insect life.

Morning's first light would find me lighting the gas burner, its whoosh and crackle chasing the nip out of the air. Breakfast, which more often than not was bread and jam, really didn't require the burner, but I would put water on to heat for washing up, and to make tea. Heat was a luxury, and the gas bottle was my lifeline to comfort. It had two attachments: one the burner, which screwed on to the top of the bottle, and the other a heater, with a reflective shield, although we'd learned early on we couldn't afford to use the heater, for it would go through the entire bottle of gas in a night.
Housekeeping was the first order of the day, and laundry chief among the tasks. While there were Laundromats available, if one traveled into the Israeli neighborhoods, the cost was prohibitive, so I washed by hand. I would set up my tubs in the sun, and work my way through, lightest colors first, doling out just enough hot water to take the chill from the tub, but not enough to make it warm.

Often as I washed or made breakfast the sound of a pipe would trickle down to me, followed by the tinkle of a bell. I would stop to watch a herd of sheep pour over the crest of the hill, accompanied usually by a small boy, piping and springing along with the sheep, although sometimes an old man trudged behind instead. The herds were huge, and like a flock of locusts, ate everything in their path. By the time the warm season came around, there was not a shred of vegetation left on the open lands.

The flocks, I learned, were from a village on the other side of the mountain, on their way down to the wadi to graze and drink. They belonged to a group called the Sawahari—a particular Bedouin tribe whose territory had been appropriated by the Israeli suburb on the other side of the UN compound. This was my introduction to local social divisions, for I could sense the difference when the family spoke of the Sawahari and when they spoke of their mountain neighbors. Children of the mountain were not allowed to play with the others, and the Sawahari animals were not permitted on the private lands.

Sheep and goats were the stock of choice in the area, and for good reason. Small, mobile, low-maintenance, they produce more milk and meat per head on far less feed and area than cattle. And they have a long history here. When we read of sacrifices performed in the Bible, it’s most likely goat; a small detail, but it puts a ‘face’ on the concept for me, one that causes me to pause, for they are personable, friendly little beasts, and I can see
that, in a strange way, it would make the sacrifice more precious. The tradition continues, more or less, to this day. Jidi (young male goats) are slaughtered on important occasions, from holidays and weddings to the birth of a son, and the meat is cooked and shared as widely as possible among neighbors and family.

Mamasan kept a goat, mainly for milk. Each spring she would breed the nanny, and then would have to find a place for the offspring. The young goats were treated like pets by the kids, coddled and carried around until they got too big, and Mamasan would put her foot down—Enough! Take that animal back to the pen and leave it!—and once returned to the pen, they became stock, and would be either sold or slaughtered. It was familiar and comforting to me, for my father had similarly kept goats, although I had always refused to eat any of the meat. Similarly, Farouk, Mamasan’s next youngest, refused to eat his pets, and one day in his teens he simply became a vegetarian. He wouldn’t eat meat at all, neither goat, nor beef nor chicken. Mamasan argued with him for a while, tried tempting his appetite with dishes that had been his favorites, then shrugged, letting him make his decision. “Really,” she told me, “he never liked meat much, even when he was little.”

Although I called it the ‘big house,’ Mamasan’s house was not really large, having just three rooms, plus the veranda, kitchen and bath. It had a high ceiling, and although the rooms were small, they didn’t have a lot of furniture, so they felt spacious. The house was covered in the mandatory ‘Jerusalem stone,’ a type of creamy or buff colored stone that was required by city regulations. It was built backed up against the mountain, perhaps eight feet away from the rock itself, and directly behind the kitchen were chambers—caves, actually—in the limestone that were used as part of the living
space. To the left of the kitchen entrance, a small wooden door opened onto a couple of steep steps, leading down into a ‘room’ that was almost completely underground. On the western side, near the top of the wall, was a screened opening, perhaps ten inches square, which provided ventilation and light. The walls had been plastered once, and the plaster remained in places, but the ceiling was still bare stone, with traces of lichen and mineral stains, and a single bulb hanging from a thick, cobweb covered wire. This small room stayed cold and damp, even on the hottest days of summer, and was used as a pantry and general kitchen storage area. It was dark and eerie to me, and whenever Mamasan sent me to fetch something from in the ‘small cave,’ I stepped in gingerly and scurried out as quickly as I possibly could.

I had no such reservations about the large cave, though. I had been fascinated when I first saw it, walking over to touch the wall and staring up at the gently rounded roof. It felt ancient, and I found out later that it was. This chamber had been in use for generations just in the family’s history; it had probably been sheltering people and animals for as long as they’d lived in these hills. About twenty five feet long and perhaps twenty feet deep, the cave was open all along one side where it faced the back wall of the house. The ceiling dipped a little at the front, and then rose up inside to a surprising height. A concrete floor had been poured, but the bones of the mountain jutted up through it in places. It was a multi-purpose living space, used as kitchen annex, patio, summertime sitting room, and outdoor bedroom. It remained cool in the summer and not terribly frigid in the winter, the natural limestone of the mountain insulating and regulating the temperature.
Not a day went by without a trip or two back and forth to Mamasan’s. If I didn’t show up in the morning, she would send one of the girls for me as soon as they returned from school. They were puzzled as to why and how I spent my time alone. It seemed strange to them that I would want to stay by myself, especially with David out of town or not home. Mamasan tried inviting me to spend the night whenever he was gone, but I wouldn’t do it, preferring to spend the evening with my books and guitar, after the children had gone to bed, or simply snuggling up near them and sleeping. One thing I was seldom allowed to do, once I’d ventured out, was to return alone. Whenever I left her house, Mamasan would send someone along to walk me home, usually Ilham, but sometimes the two youngest, Maha and Farouk. Sometimes I would arrive home with a small flock following me—problematic if they wanted to stay, since I had only two chairs.

Over the months two perfect trails between the big house and my little shack had been worn into the dirt. One came from the top, along the upper terraces, through a section of barbed wire fence, across my roof, and down a stretch of crumbled wall onto the walk outside the door. It required a good bit of nimbleness, so I seldom went that way when carrying water. The lower route, which was safer, although longer, dropped to the terrace below and then re-ascended that plus two more to get to Mamasan’s level. The walk itself was almost always a source of pleasure. Depending on which path I took, I could pick a few almonds or mulberries to snack on, or some greens for salad, and I never knew what interesting flora or fauna I might run across. My observations of the place and its life were capped with delight at both their novelty—I’d never seen such things—and their nearness.
On one such trip, I was startled by a rustling just off the path. I traced the noise and to where a large grey lizard was stalking through dried grass. I was surprised at the length and thickness of its body, which was more than twice the size of the whiptails and bluetails I was familiar with. It was both interesting and creepy; that was an awful lot of lizard flesh on the move. He noticed me following and picked up the pace, moving quickly away and maneuvering rapidly to place obstacles between us. With a final zig zag he disappeared from view, and I gave up the chase. As I made my way back over a low stone wall, shortcutting to get back to the trail, my eye was drawn to an odd lump a couple yards down, beneath a bitter almond tree. I blinked. It moved, ever so slightly. I stood for a moment, frozen between fear and curiosity. A dark eye watched me blankly. It was a chameleon, which I recognized only from photographs. He returned to movement, having decided I wasn’t a threat, and went about his business, picking one foot up, ever so slowly, easing it forward and putting it down. He repeated the process with the next foot. I moved and he froze again. His shape, color and texture were beautiful, strange, and incredibly reptilian, but the eye, moving around so freely, was unnerving. Then he rolled his tail up, and I bolted over the wall. It was several days before I took the same path again.

Other animals were less local, if more vocal. One evening, as I was readying the children for bed, a strange trumpeting sound began. It grew louder and louder, seemed to circle around and then to come from all directions at once, and I went out to see what was making all the racket. The air was moist with dew, and I could see the shadow of the forest at the top of the hill, nearly black against the dusky sky. A flock of birds, some type of water fowl by the sound of it, had made an after-dark landing, scattering widely.
across the mountain top. I would hear a honk from the top of the hill, answered a few
second later from the east, and then from below me. Judging from the number and
distribution of sounds there must have been many hundreds of birds, but I could see
nothing. Individual calls continued off and on all night, rolling sonorously over and
around the mountain side. My curiosity was piqued beyond measure, and I tossed and
turned most of the night, but when I rose in the morning the flock had already moved on.
I learned that we were on a major migration path, and the same phenomenon was
repeated year to year.

David came home one afternoon with a box in which was nestled a pair of baby
hawks. They were awkward yet beautiful, not quite fully fledged, with bits of fluff
sticking out between smooth feathers. They were unafraid when we reached in and took
them out, their eyes huge and intent, but their hungry mewing was pitiful. They had been
at someone’s house where David had gone visiting with Emad and Mohammed, and he’d
felt sorry for the birds, and somehow talked the ‘owners’ into giving them up. He brought
them home with the intent of freeing them—just as soon as they could take care of
themselves. Problem was, they were a long, hungry distance from grown up enough to do
that, and such birds don’t eat bread or rice or even chicken feed. They eat meat, an
extremely expensive commodity that we had long gone without. We managed, somehow,
to keep them fed, and to get them raised up and flying. The first time they hunted on their
own was cause for celebration, and a week or two later they were gone. For several
months afterward they could be seen in the area, occasionally circling the little shack and
riding the air currents across the ridge, although eventually they disappeared.
The family lived in close harmony with the mountain. They proudly called themselves peasants, although in truth they were landowners, well educated and fairly well off. In early spring Mamasan put in a huge garden of cool season plants—lettuce, spinach, radishes, green onions, as well as a field or two of lentils or some other small crop. When it warmed she would plant the garden with tomatoes, peppers, squash and corn, and begin harvesting and storing tender grape leaves from the vines scattered up and down the mountain terraces, and in early summer she would spend a few hours each day for a week or two with a scythe in hand, cutting and drying the wild grasses for hay to feed the animals in the winter.

I went out with her and the younger children, that first year, and attempted to help make hay, cutting and piling enthusiastically, if inexpertly. However, the strangely curved scythe was awkward for me. It was easier for me to pull and snap the grasses off, and I could make faster progress without it, nearly keeping up with Mamasan.

"Are you a fellaha?" asked Maha.

"Fellaha? What means ‘fellaha’?"

Ilham came to my rescue, translating, "It mean farmer. Someone who work like this," she said, gesturing at the piles of cut grass.

"Well, not a farmer, but we had animals and a garden."

"What animals? Did you have cows?" Ilham asked, now genuinely curious.

"No, just goats and horses and sometimes burros—you know, donkeys..." I put my hands up miming donkey ears, and Maha giggled. "And chickens. We didn’t have a farm though. Just a big yard. I guess my grandfather’s father was a farmer, but I never knew him."
Mamasan asked what we were talking about, and Ilham explained.

"See, a Fellaha, like us," she declared, and nodded her head as though it was a foregone conclusion. I could see no way of explaining the difference, although it had something to do with luxury and necessity. My family could easily have done without the vegetables, eggs and meat, but Mamasan’s husbandry provided an important contribution to her family’s diet. I went back to piling the sweet grass, thinking about my great grandfather, long gone. I wondered what he had used to cut his hay.

Mamasan’s third son, Emad, was good with animals and helped her with them, castrating the young billys and doctoring any that fell sick. He was really a bird lover, though, and had caught or purchased a number of canaries and finches and other small birds. The cages lined the sheltered wall by the cave, and several more kept Mamasan’s liwan and veranda filled with song. He was forever hunting and capturing whatever winged wildlife came his way, but the strangest thing he caught was an eagle. I’m still not sure how he captured it, but he brought it home, wrapped in a quilt, its wicked beak and unfeeling eyes peering out over the floral print. Emad found it a temporary roost in an empty chicken run, then shanghaied everyone he could find to help make a bigger cage for it. The enclosure filled Mamasan’s entire kitchen garden, and neighbors from across the mountain came by to see the huge bird. Even the children of the Sawahiri would stand up on the road and watch it from a distance. The cage, big as it was, was far too small for it. Emad knew this, and after a few weeks he freed the eagle, wrapping it again in a quilt and taking it to the top of the mountain to release. It rose slowly and flapped off toward the Dead Sea, and I was very glad to see it go.
Farouk, like his older brother, loved being outside, and spent his free hours wandering around the mountain, following animals, catching bugs and finding the unexpected. Often he would turn up at the door and tell me I should come and see some wild thing or another, and I would drop what I was doing to go and look. He brought frogs and baby birds for inspection, and was quite likely to visit with a baby goat in tow or a kitten tucked in his pocket. He harassed the rooster unmercifully, almost as gleefully as he baited his sisters, and unlike the rest of the family, seemed to actually like dogs, a rare thing among the Muslims there. Dogs weren’t kept as pets; they were considered dirty, and no-one coddled or petted them. If a family had a dog, it was for either sheep or protection, and it was kept outside, since an area fouled by a dog was not fit to pray in.

Just as I was learning about the land, and becoming acquainted with the genius loci, so was I coming to know the people and their ways, introduced one word, one idea at a time. Some phrases absolutely delighted me. I learned the difference between the simple word for house, ‘beyt,’ and the word ‘dar’ that was sort of an all-encompassing term that could indicate the building, the people, and the general vicinity. Mamasan’s house was called by Abu Mazin’s name, that is, dar Abu Mazin, since generally households were named after the paternal figure. For some reason, though, the little house where I was living was not called dar Abu Somebody, but dar Haj Dahoud. I had to ask what a Hajdahoud was, and it was such a complicated thing that Ilham gave up and took me to see her father. We sat in the less formal liwan, or family room, rather than on the veranda, and drank mint flavored tea. Abu Mazin’s English was good, although little used and quite formal, and I could hear in his accents something slightly British.

“You want to know about the small house, dar Haj Dahoud?”
I affirmed my interest, asking why it was called that.

"It is... it was... the owner's name."

"It was?"

"He is dead, he has been dead for some time."

My imagination jumped to ghosts. "Did he die there?"

"No. He died in the hospital. He was an old man. He had no son."

Abu Mazin told me a little about the man whose name, Haj Dahoud, was attached to the little shack, how he had lived alone, taking care of the place after the rest of the family fled in '67. Then he explained the term Haj. It was a leap. I had never heard of the pilgrimage to Mecca, or any of the other aspects of Islam, and it was in this accidental way that I began my acquaintance with the religion. He loaned me a copy of the Koran, with English and Arabic side-by-side on the page, but the text was nearly incomprehensible to me, since I had no concept at all of Arab history, culture or religion. Still, he was a teacher by nature, habit and occupation, and eventually was able to give me background enough to begin to understand the context of the book and the religion. We continued the dialogue over the next several years as he tried to educate me about the role of Islam in society and in the Arab world.

A few months into our stay in the small stone house, we were called to another conference at dar Abu Mazin. They had word back from Jordan, from the owners, who were unconvinced as to our harmlessness. We were undoubtedly Jews come to squat on their land and steal it. We could not stay there. I was heartbroken at having to move again, dismayed at the thought of going back to living in the tent, and I went home, leaving before the meeting had run its full course, biting back the tears as I walked.
threw myself onto the old iron bed. It was nothing fancy—in fact, it was barely shelter, lacking glass in the window, or running water or any other amenity. Still, it was the most secure and comfortable I’d been in a year. Maha had walked me home, and she was perplexed by my obvious distress.

"Why are you sad?" she asked.

"I don’t want to leave. I like you, and Mamasan, and the mountain…" I was weeping in earnest now. "I don’t want to leave." I didn’t have the vocabulary to elaborate, but she understood me all the same.

"Don’t be afraid. My father will fix it." She looked at me doubtfully as I sat there still sniffing. "Don’t cry," she commanded, "don’t worry!" and bid me good-bye. Of course she went home and told her mother, and her father, and anyone else who was listening that the ajnabeeya, who didn’t even make a sound when her son was born, was crying because she didn’t want to leave the mountain. This was a source of amusement for some time. People who live in difficult circumstances—particularly abusive conditions—tend towards stoicism, and for the Palestinians displays of emotion were frowned on in anyone out of diapers. It’s a survival tactic, a way to preserve dignity. My tears, besides undignified, were unnecessary, for Abu Mazin found a way for us to stay.

Just down from Mamasan’s was a small house. The owner was currently out of the country, married and living in the U.S., somewhere on the east coast. Abu Mazin contacted him, received permission and instructions as to how the arrangement was to be handled, and within a few weeks we were given permission to move in. I felt unbelievably lucky, and this feeling was compounded when I went inside. The house actually had running water and electricity, and an outhouse within easy distance. It was
built so that its back half was buried in the mountain. The front was stone, beautiful, old weathered limestone, a couple of feet thick, and the windows were set on the outside of the wall so that there was a deep niche on the inside. The house faced across the valley, looking over and down to the Old City, and I spent many hours looking out those windows, sitting in the niche, back against one side and feet against the other, watching the daylight change across the battlements, and the storms as they blew in from the west and surged over the hilltop.

The interior of the house was plaster, and had been plastered and painted many times, in many colors. These layers were evident in various degrees, for as the moisture soaked in from the surrounding earth, the plaster flaked and fell. It left some portions one color and other portions another, the borders softly blurred between one color layer and the next, like a gentle tie-dye color scheme.

Having electricity meant that we could stay awake past dark, and best of all, it meant I could listen to music. Someone gave us a radio, and Radio Jordan became a frequent companion. It opened each morning with a fanfare—I assume it was the Jordanian anthem—and closed each night with the same sign-off sequence—a practice emergency signal, station identification and affirmation that programming would begin again in the morning at 6:00am, followed by silence. It was an English language broadcast, sometimes veddy British, since much of the content came from the BBC, with a variety of programs featuring everything from jazz to classical to country and western, topped off with pop music, news in English, and occasional ‘cultural’ programming. It was my sole contact with the outside world, bringing a sense of order to things through the measured cadence of the Queen’s English and the regularity of programming, and
although the playlist was a little Euro-flavored for my taste, I would occasionally turn it up and set the house to rocking. On a few occasions I listened to a pirate station, the “Voice of Peace,” which broadcast “from somewhere in the Mediterranean,” but it was difficult to find, not dependable, and was geared toward Israelis, with Hebrew announcements and ads.

We settled in to the house, putting up curtains (an old blanket), a clothes line and a barrel to burn trash in. We had a place to stay, but employment was still iffy—so much so that one month we found we didn’t even have the money for the minimal rent or power bill. Once again, a meeting with Abu Mazin. My husband returned to the house, shaking his head in disbelief. Instead of giving him the boot, Abu Mazin had given him hope. Not only had he found a person who was willing to pay the month’s rent as a charitable gift, but he also had word of a possible job.

That was an economic turning point for us, as that job brought another connection, and another job, and that another. Somehow we were now within the community, benefiting from connections between family and friends, and living through the informal economic structure that existed outside of—even in spite of—Israeli control. David had skills and knowledge in the field of construction, and the booming population on both sides of the political fence needed those skills.

When we had first moved into the house, it had been expected that David would use his skills and tools to fix it up, perhaps to get the plumbing working and put a real kitchen in. Iman queried me one day as to why he never worked on our house, but was always fixing and building for other people. I thought about it, and had no real answer, although an old adage gave me some insight to offer her.
“We have a saying, in English, but you'll have to help me translate it. What is the name for the man who makes shoes to sell?”

“Shoemaker.”

“Okay, it goes like this: ‘The shoemaker's children go barefoot, and the carpenter's roof leaks.’ And that's how it is around here.”

She nodded sagely. “True enough,” she agreed. “We have the same sort of saying, but it’s put a little differently in Arabic.”

In Good Form

I continued learning the ways of the mountain and its people. Five times each day I could hear the wudthen, the call to prayer, as it resounded from across the valley. The call would begin with the phrase “Allahhhhhh hu akbar, allahhhhh hu akbar!” Whenever I heard it, I had to stop and listen. Sometimes the caller had a beautiful voice, but occasionally the voice would make me cringe. Often, the wind carried the sound so that it was as clear as someone calling outside the window, but other times, it was a thin, distant melody insinuating itself into my consciousness. I grew to love it.

Down the hill and to the south a little was the house of an ancient, curmudgeonly widow named Helwe. She was related to the family, on one side by blood, and on the other by marriage. She was strange and unpredictable, frightening children by her quick movements and over-loud voice and the unfortunate tendency to pinch. She generally kept to herself until some unknown factor would send her out among the world, visiting and making her views known. Her eyes always seemed feverish, and in the wrong mood she could be combative and bossy, and yet she got away with it all, due to her advanced
years and reduced circumstances. People would say, “Ya haraam, heaven forbid, such a shame—it’s so sad that her son doesn’t take care of her,” and “ah, miskine, the poor thing, she is old and a widow.” To me she seemed as tough as leather, and I was never sure how to take her approaches.

Helwe was the first person outside of Mamasan’s family to call on me formally, and one of the first to title me in the proper Arab way with my son’s name. It was a fine morning, and I’d been standing outside doing the wash. I heard her approaching from fifty yards away as she hollered, “Heyya, Im Omar!” Her voice was piercing. I stuck my head around the corner, and saw her turning down the path to my house.

“Heyya, Im Omar!” she yelled again. I scurried to pull my two chairs outside into the courtyard.

“Ahlo Sahlan, ya Hajja,” I met her with my best manners and the highest honorifics I knew. “Greetings, a hundred welcomes, please have a seat.” I made conversation as well as I could, brewed some tea, and served it in my ‘best’ glasses, matching plastic yogurt containers. She took a cup to be polite, drank a swallow and grimaced. The ajnabeyya was obviously unable to make decent tea. She chatted for a few moments, mostly simple questions that I was hard put to understand, since her accent and dialect were different from Mamasan’s. As she prepared to take her leave she told me I should visit her sometime, pinched my daughter’s cheek until she cried, and departed. Apparently she betook herself to the big house next, for on the following day, Mamasan gave me a lesson in tea making.
“First fill the pot with cold water, and put it on the fire, like this.” She suited action to words. “Put in the sugar.” She scooped in what seemed to be at least a full cup of pure white sugar.

“That’s too much. Sugar is bad for your teeth, it’s not good for you,” I protested, wondering how to explain cavities and diabetes.

“If you don’t put enough sugar in, the tea won’t be any good.” Then she explained the significance. “It must be sweet. It is not polite to offer bitter tea. You may drink bitter tea by yourself, if you wish, but always, always put in plenty of sugar for your guests. And it is good to flavor the tea with mint or sage or something fragrant.” She stirred the sugar in, making sure it dissolved, and when the water was few seconds from boiling, she lifted it from the burner, measured and scooped in the loose tea, and covered the pot.

“Always we make tea. In the morning, with breakfast; at noon, with lunch; at dinnertime with the meal, or even when there is no food, by Heaven, we make tea. And guests must always have tea: the best, freshest, sweetest tea we can give them. That’s just what we do.”

When I departed that afternoon she gave me a set of tea glasses. Apparently recycled yogurt containers were not quite appropriate either.

Drinking Tea, 2002

The hospital at Ein Karem was a hodgepodge of buildings, wings, passageways and gates. The sidewalks and walls were old, worn to the point of shabby, and crusted over with years of pain, sorrow, and stubborn dirt. Despite its rundown appearance, Ein Karem was reputedly far better equipped than the clinics in the Old City or the territories,
and, in true Hippocratic spirit, it accepted all patients. Open door policy not withstanding, security forces were posted at each entrance, checking IDs, bags and occasionally even doing pat-down searches. When it was our turn to pass, Mohammed was asked for name, ID, who we were here to see and where we were going. They carried out the exchange in English, borrowing its third party neutrality. We were here to visit his mother, she was in room such and such, second floor, oncology ward. I was required to show my passport, and confirm that I was going to the same room. We were granted entrance.

Mamasan’s room was up one flight of stairs, and down a hallway that seemed to wrap around and around for miles. The moment of greeting was quiet—contact made with eyes first, then words and arms—but intense. It had been a long time, yet seeing her in this setting seemed incongruous—the vital woman I knew didn’t belong in a hospital. I was struck by how near and familiar her face was, even though so many years had passed. But the battle was wearing on her body; she had lost weight, and was nearly thin, except for the swelling in her abdomen and lower limbs. The change was shocking, for she had always been round, robust and active. Her skin was extremely pale, and her hair lay lank against the pillow. Judging by the roots, it had been a couple of months since it had been dyed. She had favored a henna rinse that brought out the red highlights. In its absence, her hair was thin and silver, and the hennaed portion at the ends had yellowed. I sat on the long bench under the window, listening to her and Mohammed as they talked, waiting for the syllables and syntax to become familiar again, and relearning the sound of her voice.

The men folk had been taking turns sleeping there, although it sounded like the greatest share of tending to her had fallen to Mohammed. I claimed the duty for myself
that night and sent him home, accepting no argument or protestations. He said he would be back in the morning to accompany his mother to treatment. By this point, it was undoubtedly all familiar to her, but one of her boys or her husband came each day to be her protection and liaison with the hospital staff. She spoke no Hebrew, and most of the staff had no Arabic, so their interactions were limited and unsatisfactory if no one from the family was available to translate. After he left, I dimmed the lights, and Mamasan and I settled in to catch up. We talked about the changes in the country, the troubles, the general outlook of things, and then Mamasan began quizzing me about my life, and my children. I had been a young woman when I left, with small children and babies. Now my children were grown, and I was alone. We talked of her family, kids and grandkids, their difficulties and prospects. Finally, I asked her about her condition.

Because my vocabulary was so under-developed, lacking words like ‘treatment’ and ‘tumor,’ or ‘radiation and chemotherapy,’ she was forced to explain things in the roundabout, descriptive way one would explain to a child. The cancer had grown in her womb for a long while, protected and nourished like a fetus. She had noticed the heaviness, and had constant pain for a long time before she finally went to a doctor. I don’t know what his failure was, other than her description of him as a jackass, but he did not discover the true source of her pain. Because of her reticence, and the uncomfortable nature of the exam and procedure, she delayed far too long getting a second opinion. By the time she went in again, the cancer had spread outside of the uterus, invading her abdomen, and growing into her other organs. She spoke in vivid, simple terms and mimed for me the effects of the growths, the pain, and her own attempts to cope with it. I
sat with the woman who had offered me kindness, support and understanding at a crucial point in my life, and realized I could do nothing to help her.

In their usual highly efficient way, the Israelis had provided both a sitting area and sleeping arrangement for guests. The bench under the window was just long enough to sleep on. Mamasan urged me to rest, and I pulled the blanket over me. We continued to chat for a while, until after a period of silence her breathing settled into the heavier rhythm of sleep. Periodically, I could hear moans from the next room down, until the med-cart stopped in the hall, and a nurse went in, apparently to give out the night’s prescription. Shortly thereafter, silence reigned. I pushed the door nearly closed to block the light from the hallway, and slept at last. In the morning, Mohammed arrived, plastic cups in hand. He had stopped at the vending machine down the hall.

“Do you want to drink tea?” he asked, handing me a cup much like the yogurt containers I had once used for tea glasses. “I put already sugar.”
CHAPTER 6

WEDDING SEASON

Iman came to my door one afternoon in early summer and commanded me to come back with her to the house. I followed. Her authority, as the oldest daughter, came naturally, and it never occurred to me to question it. I might put off the younger children, tell them “later” or “not now,” depending on my mood, but if Iman had been sent to fetch me, I had to go. She tried to explain, and I caught a few words, and the name of the nearest neighbors, but was still clueless as to what the matter was. When I got to the house, Ilham explained that there was a wedding, at dar Abu Anis’s, and we were going to attend. Iman’s chore was to get me dressed acceptably—not an easy task, since my concept of modesty was not fully compatible with theirs, and my wardrobe was not only limited but somewhat outré for mountain tastes. Iman tried me in several of her outfits, with disappointing results. I was far too tall and thin, nowhere near the same size or shape. After much head shaking and tut-tutting, I had sense enough to go home and put on my long cotton skirt. It was somewhat worse for wear, since it had been my only dress, and my main ‘maternity’ outfit, but it was better, I supposed, than overalls. A change of shoes, from my flip flops to my only other shoes, a far-too-worn pair of Mao-style canvas flats, and after re-tucking my hair into a scarf, I supposed I would do. I cleaned up my children, changed their clothes and washed their faces despite protests, and returned to the house, the ajnabeeya made presentable, I hoped. Once again, head
shakings. This time it was my diaper bag, a pair of jeans I had ‘remodeled’ by cutting off the legs, sewing the bottom shut and attaching a cord through the belt loops for a strap.

Mamasan stepped in and drew the line.

“La (no)” she said, touching the bag. “This won’t do; it’s ayeb (rude).”

I didn’t argue. Once something was ayeb, it was out of the question. I opted to leave the bag behind, thinking that at least it would provide me a good excuse to return home when I needed to change the baby.

Finally everyone was dressed and ready. The women—Mamasan, Wafa, Iman, Helwe and myself—filed out of the house and walked sedately up the path to the road. Ilham was torn between walking with us and joining the youngsters as they took off across the fields. They were certain to beat us to the neighbor’s by at least ten minutes, and bound to have more fun getting there. She chose finally to walk with us, which greatly cheered my daughter, who was sulking because I made her stay with me. Mamasan had taken me to call on Im Aniis before, ostensibly for a midmorning cup of tea. On that occasion we’d crossed the field like the children, and come out near the lower gate to Im Aniis’s garden, where we’d hallooed her and been swept into the house for tea and chocolate. Im Aniis was unusual among the mountain women that I’d met; apparently she’d been schooled in South America somewhere, and her second language was Spanish. It was difficult to hold a conversation with her, for she refused to work with my limited Arabic, but as she tried to use her equally limited English, she slipped in and out of Spanish. I also had the uncomfortable feeling that she was too interested in me—her eyes were sharp and prodding. Nonetheless, I thought it was kind of her to invite me
for the wedding. I was unfamiliar with the protocol that brought nearly everyone on the
mountain to stop by and offer congratulations. It would have been rude if I hadn’t gone.

Approaching from the street on this wedding day, we had not only a much longer
walk, but a nearly vertical run of stairs to get from the road down to the front entrance
and gate. The terraces grew narrower and more frequent near Abu Aniis’s, for this part of
the mountain was steeper as it neared its junction with the next mountain over. As we got
closer to the house, I could hear drums and voices singing or chanting. We descended the
precipitous stairs and entered the courtyard, bypassing the main entrance, although as we
went by the window of the formal visiting room, I could see that it was filled to
overflowing with men. We continued along the walk to the side entrance and went inside.

Mamasan made sure I greeted Im Aniis, who was holding court in the liwan,
where she could keep an eye on the kitchen. Then I was introduced here and there,
feeling very awkward, although to my surprise I wasn’t the only Anglo there—apparently
someone in the family had married a British woman. We nodded and shook hands, and
passed on. After a few moments Maha dragged me off to the center point of the
celebration, a low-roofed room offset from the main house. It was full, packed almost
wall to wall with women: old women in heavily embroidered black thobes, their fragile
white scarves trailing almost to the ground; middle aged women in colorful long skirts
and blouses, pale chiffon scarves tied under their chins; younger women in western style
dresses, many with no scarf at all. There were women seated on low stools, women
standing in groups, women with babies propped on shoulders or hips, and women moving
in a circle, dancing with a slow shuffle step to the beat of a small skin covered drum. The
only time I’d ever been in such a females-only crowd was in the girls’ locker room at
school. Obviously, the segregation of sexes continued even during weddings. I settled on one of the stools in an empty corner, laid my baby son across my lap and sat, swaying my knees to the drum beats and watching.

The bride was seated on a chair which had been placed on a makeshift platform, a low table decorated with fabric and streamers. The wall behind her was covered with a tapestry depicting Jerusalem, and more paper streamers, and a framed page of ornate script, undoubtedly a verse from the Koran. The bride herself was as decorated as a bakery cake, with make up thick as frosting on her skin and her hair piled high in an intricate up-do that had probably taken five hours and a gallon of hair spray to accomplish. Her hands had been painted with something orangeish—henna, I learned later—and her dress and veil were as intricate and western as something you’d see in a high end bridal magazine. She sat still and pale as a marble statue, her eyes far away. I tried to smile at her, for she looked so wan and distant I thought perhaps she needed some encouragement, but she didn’t respond. Of course she wasn’t supposed to, but I didn’t know that. Brides did not ‘party’ at their weddings, their behavior being strictly governed by a code of modesty and restraint. However miserable she was, pinned to her throne, the rest of the crowd was there for a good time.

In fact, much of the partying seemed to be going on with the old, old women, the beyond-grandmother crowd, as they talked and laughed animatedly. These women were the ones singing, clapping, chanting and dancing, and every so often one or two would break out with a skull piercing ululation. The dance circle spun and morphed in front of the bride’s dais, growing, shrinking and occasionally reversing. The songs were mostly call and response, stretching out for sometimes ten minutes; I could understand none of
the words, chanted in a high, almost atonal pitch, but I could catch a repeated phrase—probably the chorus—occasionally, and sometimes lines would cause the younger girls to giggle or look embarrassed. One of the dances required a handkerchief, and it seemed as though all of the old ladies were in on that one, whipped their hankies out from the front pocket of their thobes, circling and stomping with fervor.

The music stopped briefly while the drum was passed on to someone else, an older woman with a strong-featured, deeply creased face. Unlike the younger drummer, she sang the song she was playing, apparently an amusingly suggestive one, for there was a lot of hooting and giggling at the verses, and a great deal of audience participation on the chorus. After a few more songs the bride descended from her throne and graced the room with a stately dance, a cross between a slow motion, much restricted belly dance and a hula, with its focused, exaggerated hand movements. Another song, and suddenly there was some shift in the crowd; the drum fell silent. Apparently the party was changing modes, as women were flowing out of the room, but I had long since lost Ilham, and had no one else to ask questions of. With the general egress I took the opportunity to find my daughter, who was playing outside with Maha and few other girls. Since it was already dusk, and I wanted to get home before dark, I asked Maha to tell her mother I had gone home. She was torn by conflicting impulses; on one hand she was reluctant to leave the wedding, but on the other she felt she should walk me home.

"It's early still," she argued, trying to get me to stay, and knowing her mother wouldn't want me walking home alone.

"I want to get the children ready for bed."

"Mamasan will wonder where you are."

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“I know. That’s why you have to tell her I took the children home. Ye’la. Don’t worry.” On rare occasions I could convince Maha to do something she wanted to do anyway, and this time she let me have the last word. Balancing my son on one side, I took my daughter’s hand with the other, and as she chattered about what she and the other children had been playing, we climbed the steep stairs back up to the road. The mountain air was cool and very still after the hubbub of the wedding.

I had nothing with which to compare what I had just seen. I’d been to one wedding in my life, a ‘little chapel of the flowers’ kind of Vegas wedding for a family member, back when I was a child. My own had simply been the officiating clergyman, his wife, and my husband’s roommate, called because we needed a second witness. I was surprised that a wedding was such huge social event. I learned later that this had been a low-key affair. There had been no band hired, or fancy hall rented, or food catered. The trend for many Palestinians had been toward more elaborate, western-style affairs. Im Aniis had done things in the old way, whether for economy’s sake or for principle I don’t know, but after I had attended a few of the new-fangled weddings at hotels or halls, I appreciated the old style, with its closeness to home and family, and its reliance on each generation to carry forward the traditions. In a few decades, when the current elders have passed on, who will remember the old songs? Who will learn to play the handheld drum when only hired bands play at weddings? There were a couple hundred people at dar Abu Aniis’s: neighbors, friends and family from all over the world, not just the country. They came to share the joy, yes, and to celebrate, but their presence also reinforced both tradition and community and the continuation of a cycle. I slept that night and dreamed
of the grandmothers, hundreds of ancient crones, stomping in a circle in honor of the new bride.

Family Circumstances, 2002

Emad sought me out in the kitchen to ask if I wanted to see his horses. Early that morning he had let the pair of them out to graze on the hillside, and they’d spent the day wandering across his family’s swath of land, snatching and nibbling at winter dried vegetation, until they turned up in the late afternoon not far from their corral, just down the hill from the main house.

“Her name Spring,” he said, running his hand up under the filly’s scraggly mane, rubbing the lumpy winter coat. She returned the attention with a bump of her head, and began lipping his coat pocket. The mare, out of either jealousy or a belated urge to protect her offspring, wandered over and edged between us, pushing her daughter down the slope. The mare was a bit thin, but not unhealthily so, and I laughed as she walloped Emad a sound one with the side of her head, demanding his attention.

“What’s her name?”

“Her name Salaam,” he said, and translated unnecessarily, “it mean Peace.”

We stood a few moments, scratching and petting the mare, as Emad worked up a question. He wasn’t a big talker to begin with, and the leap to English made it even more difficult for him. Our conversations seemed to follow a pattern: he would construct a few sentences in English, I’d answer first in English, and then we would gradually slide into Arabic. It was a lot faster, and more comfortable, since my vocabulary was adequate, even if my verbs were occasionally mangled.
He turned Salaam's head toward me, and asked "What model you think she is?"
I had to grin as I caught the meaning. Trust a guy to know automotive terms, no matter
the language.

"I don’t know. Do you know anything about her parents?" I replied in Arabic as I
stepped back to get a look at her, checking the shape of her legs and head. She was
medium boned, sorrel colored, dark skin; nothing clearly stamped her a specific breed,
but a delicacy in her muzzle suggested an Arabian heritage—not surprising, after all.

"Her father big," he said, gesturing. "Her mother small. I think maybe she have
some Arab."

"Probably," I agreed. "She’s pretty, anyway," I added, as I moved more to her
leeward side and shivered a bit. The wind whipped bitter across the naked limestone, and
there was no warmth to be had from the sickly winter sun. It made the mountainside seem
bleak. The mare sneezed and worked her hind end around to the wind, leaving me
exposed again. I ran my fingers under the coarse hair of her mane. Horses seemed an odd
thing to me in this place and at this time, very unpragmatic for a terrain crowded as this.
So many people, so little room, such highly contested space. This hillside was the only
one left with any open area at all.

"You want to ride her? I’ll get a rope," he offered generously and, I thought,
impulsively.

"No, but thanks anyway. She looks hungry. Is it time for them to eat?" Salaam
was insistently nibbling at Emad’s jacket.

"Ahh, yes, it is. Look at her, the silly thing. You want to feed them?" he asked. I
demurred, claiming I was too cold. He pushed her head away and addressed her
affectionately. "Let's go, you poor hungry beast." He led her off down the hill, his arm over her neck, the little filly tagging along behind.

I climbed back up the hill to the house, stopping on the verandah to look out over the family's land. Far below, near the bottom of the property, was Mazin's house. It was considerably larger now than the two tiny rooms it had when I first was here, although still not large enough for all the family living in it. Right above that, a little to the left, was the start of Farouk's house. It had progressed no further than walls and roof, but it was a start, even though he was just engaged. He and his fiancée would have a place to live when they married. Above that, about two thirds of the way up the path, was Ilham's house. I had already heard her story, how she and her husband had applied time after time for a permit and been turned down, and how they had decided to build anyway, to pay the fines they would get after the fact, because they needed a house to live in, and if they waited for permits from the Israelis they would probably wait until hell froze over. Omar had done well for himself, and built a larger, more comfortable house next to his parents, paying bribes when necessary, finagling and fighting for his permits. It struck me then that Emad had a corral, but not a house. The issue nagged me until I finally asked Ilham about it.

"Emad has a nice place for his horses," I started, trying to be subtle.

"Did you go see it?" she asked.

"Well, not up close. It looks pretty big, though. Is he going to build a house next to it?"

"No. It's only for horses. Emad don't have a family. He don't have wife or children."
“Why not? Isn’t he older than Farouk?”

“Yes, but he don’t work. Remember when he get arrested, back when you live in Bethlehem? He can not work. He is not permitted. It’s too hard. No work, no money, no wife. He love his horses, though.”

“Yes, he always did love animals.” Still, I thought, that has to be hard, watching your siblings all start families. He loved kids too, judging by how kind he’d always been to them. I realized one of my other ‘brothers’ wasn’t married either.

“What about Mohammed?”

“He say he never marry,” she replied. “He don’t want to bring children into such a bad world. There is too much trouble. Life is too hard.”

Gone are the days of massive weddings for even the most affluent—affluent being a relative term in a place where unemployment is around 80%. Instead, there are less lengthy engagements, small weddings, more of the informal marriages that don’t require all the hoopla. Celebration and delight have given over to grimness and mourning. I hear now of a strange new custom spreading across the West Bank. Youth who are killed in the conflict may have a posthumous sort of ‘wedding’ thrown for them. Their bride? The land itself. Not a pleasant thought for me, this mingling of the marital bower and the grave.
CHAPTER 7

GLIMPSES

While they say you shouldn't judge a book based on its appearance, you can frequently tell something about a person by their attire—particularly if that garb is part of their chosen identity or their background tradition. In Israel, clothing is an easy way to know what type of person you're dealing with—age, ethnicity, religion, economic and social status all have an effect on wardrobe—and indicates that the person wishes to be viewed or treated in a certain way. Headgear is very important, and small differences between an embroidered skull cap and a crocheted one, a tall hat and a shorter one, a white scarf and a black one, are as profound as skin color—or perhaps more so. Walking into a particular neighborhood, you may find entire time periods are wiped away, and the inhabitants seem to be existing in another century, at least to judge by their clothing. Don't let that exterior deceive you, though. It's a uniform chosen to signify membership in a particular community, and when you stroll through their 'hood,' you can bet their eyes are on you.

The younger generations on the mountain wore regular, almost-western clothes—jeans, tee shirts and sport shirts for daily wear, or dresses, slacks and button up shirts for special occasions. Older men dressed more formally, donning suits just about any time they went out. Much older men and the Bedouin wore heavy, dark suits with long jackets over an ankle length, skirt-like garment, although at home they often wore lighter.
dishdashas—floor length, long sleeved cotton shirts—and heavier abaya, or over-robeks. Women’s clothing preferences were similarly divided by age. The oldest generations wore the thobe—a floor length, long-sleeved dress, most often in dark, rich, heavy fabrics. They were constructed in simple panels, but the plain style was highly embellished with colorful, intricate embroidery, and they were as much works of art as they were clothing. The patterns had names like ‘grape leaf,’ or ‘the pigeons,’ or ‘damask roses,’ and women would compare their versions of a pattern, or the skill of their seamstresses. The style of the dress and type of embroidery were generally indicative of the wearer’s background; women from Al Halil wore a slightly different thobe than the women from Bethlehem, or Jerusalem, or Ramallah. Younger women generally shunned that traditional dress altogether, preferring an outfit called a jelabaya, an ankle-length, long-sleeved jacket/dress, cut rather like a trench coat, and a matching or complimentary colored headpiece. Although it was certainly a generational/style consciousness, another factor in this choice was probably cost. Thobes were custom made, hand embroidered, and very costly. Jelabayas were mass produced, sold off the rack and widely available. Within a few generations, thobes will probably be found only in museums, and dishdashas will have gone the way of the cravat.

For myself, clothing was always an issue. I was living where there was a completely different dress code, and trying to adapt a very sparse, almost non-existent wardrobe to its demands. It was even more of a struggle to keep Sufa dressed, since she had long since outgrown the clothes we had arrived with, and buying anything was not an option. I patched and let out and added to things when I could, but I didn’t have much to work with. Fortune once again was kind to us, through the unlikely instrument of
Brigham Young University. BYU had a study abroad semester program, and one of our Mormon acquaintances was involved with the program. Each new batch of students brought to the dorms everything they thought they’d need to survive. When they finished the semester and returned to the states, they left mountains of stuff behind. The head of the program offered this bounty to us, and we gratefully accepted. Perhaps a dozen large bags of clothes and blankets and several boxes of toiletries, stationery and other sundry items arrived one day. It was an almost sinful experience, going through it all and realizing I could have any of it. After I harvested what I thought I could use, the bags were passed on to other nearby families in need. I hoped that some of the things would wind up back at the houses of people who had shared their baby clothes with me.

Peace Disturbed

I spent a lot of time on my patio, doing laundry, playing with my children or sometimes just sitting quietly and watching the city. At any time of the day or night I could see traffic moving, and hear horns, bells or sirens, but it was distant, far away across the deep valley, seldom disturbing the quiet tenor of life on the mountain. Occasionally, though, this changed, and the outside world would intrude.

On a spring day in 1982, I was hanging a basket of clothes out to dry, when suddenly there were loud reports, multiple rounds of gunfire, coming from the mosque, followed by a faint pandemonium that sounded like many voices yelling. Within a moment there were sirens wailing—a lot of them, of the type used on military vehicles—all around the city. I stared across the distance, but could make out nothing but army jeeps crawling along the road below the city walls. It sounded like a major commotion.
Given their normal state of crowded confusion, I couldn’t imagine what the streets would be like during a disturbance. The air began to vibrate as the chook-chook-chook of helicopters became audible. They came up fast from the big installation east of the city, and they hovered and circled over the area of the Temple Mount. It was certainly trouble of some sort. I took the children into the house, out of sight of the choppers, but the sound could not be lost.

Rumors flew like wildfire, and when I went to see Mamasan, there were already several versions of what had happened. The only thing for certain was that there was another curfew; Arabs were being turned away from the city, and those within the city were to stay indoors. Mamasan breathed a sigh of relief when all of her offspring were accounted for. The youngsters were underfoot in the kitchen, chattering and excited. School had been closed early, and the students sent home early. ‘A hundred Arabs killed, at the mosque, while they were praying,’ was one story. Another was ‘the soldiers turned their guns on the Arabs as they were running out of the mosque,’ and yet a third was that ‘the Army is trying to seize the mosque.’ None of them were true, but the facts were still bad. An American-Israeli had gone in with his M-16, and had shot around the mosque, killing an unarmed Keeper—a cleric that watches over the shrine—and one other Arab, and wounding over a dozen others before he was arrested by soldiers. The riots and curfews lasted for weeks, violence and injury spreading outward like ripples in a pond.

Seeking Fruit

I seemed to gravitate to the olive tree outside Mamasan’s kitchen whenever I was at the house, sitting there to read, write and dwell in nostalgia. Huge, full, and perfectly
shaped, it was practically part of the house, and I had spent countless hours under its branches. When the children were little it had been a favorite place, the center of raucous games of tag; ‘home’ when they played hide and seek; a shady place to read, study, and dream. There had been a rope swing and a wide board used as a teeter-totter, which changed when they grew older to castoff tables and chairs. During the day, while they were in school, Mamasan and I would sit under the tree and visit while we prepared food or mended.

Now the ground under the tree had been informally laid with slab-cut stone, and partially encircled by a small retaining wall, the hodge-podge of furniture replaced with a white plastic patio set. Ash trays and a small charcoal brazier marked it as masculine territory: the boys usually sat there in the evening, now, pulling on cheap cigarettes or sharing the water pipe. Even in their mother’s absence, the ban on smoking inside the house held firm.

I was ensconced in my usual spot when Iman arrived early one morning for a visit. She called greetings from the door of the veranda, and made her way across the garden to the tree. She had come to invite me to spend a few days with her. At first I refused, but she slowly convinced me.

“Ilham feels bad that you are spending so much time alone,” she told me.

“She shouldn’t worry. I am happy; I keep myself occupied. At least, I try not to be a bother.”

“You’re not. It’s just that she thinks it’s rude to leave you like this, but she has to work. Why don’t you come with me, to my house, and meet my husband and children.”

“No, I don’t want to be a bother to you, either.”
“By Heaven, I’m going to be offended if you don’t. How can you come here to visit and not spend time at my house too?” Phrased like that, there was no way to gracefully refuse. I agreed, but told her I wanted to go to the hospital the next day, so it would only be for the night. We waited for Ilham to return from school, to let her know my plans, and then departed, walking up to the road.

We crossed the street caught a bus going toward her village. It was an Israeli bus, which Iman, unlike her sister, had no fear of riding. It would around the back roads, servicing the developments and settlements on the far side of the mountain. Iman’s home was in a small village overlooked and practically overwhelmed by monolithic rows of Israeli housing complexes. I remembered the area, from before, when it was covered in terraced slopes of olive trees, and sheep had grazed in the spring. That bucolic sight was gone, the natural curves of the land now covered by the stark, flat planes and angles of concrete and blacktop, and row upon row of apartments, stacked up like so many boxes.

We got off the bus at a junction with a small dirt road, and began walking. It was perhaps a third of a mile to the village, and she told me a little bit of her life here as we walked. Her husband was a good man, quiet and kind, but in ill health. Her in-laws were good to her, and she was kept quite busy caring for her husband and sons. It sounded simple, but I knew that nothing here is simple, or easy, and her story did not touch on the difficulties.

After passing several houses and a small store, we arrived finally at a metal gate, once painted a bright blue, but now a bit faded. Through this we entered and climbed, up one flight of stone steps and then up again, across a garden area and two more flights of concrete stairs before reaching Iman’s house. I looked back down the way we’d come. The view across the valley was stunning—an open vista of mountain, valley and sky. In
contrast to the concrete encrusted hill above us, the only evidence of human intrusions
were a few faint stone terraces that erratically followed the contours of the mountains,
and a small village perched on the next hill over, the outline of its mosque clear against
the autumn blue sky.

Although I hadn't wanted to leave dar Abu Mazin, I was glad I went with Iman,
for her little family was quiet and peaceful, and she seemed very happy. That evening,
after dinner, she insisted I go down to meet her in-laws. Her husband's family, like most
Palestinian families, was tightly knit, as well as closely packed, with six adults and two
children in a small two bedroom house. All of Jamil's siblings had gone to college, but
only he and one sister, now widowed and living back at home, had married. His other
brothers were unwilling to wed when they couldn't be sure of employment, or of having a
home to raise a family in; conditions were just too unsettled to really consider it.

Sitting with them at coffee, I listened as they discussed the day's news. There had
been a bombing outside an army base near Tel Aviv, and now there were curfews in
various areas around the West Bank. Nablus was practically under siege, and all major
roads had been blocked. So far all was quiet here, and I found myself hoping fervently
that it would stay that way. I had an earnest terror of being picked up for questioning.
Jamil's family was polite, but as always they asked the impossible questions: 'Why does
America allow this situation,' and 'Why do the Jews have so much power there?' There
is no way to discuss American politics without the same accusations arising, and there is
no way to discount them. It's like trying to argue that the sky isn't blue, that it's all a
matter of light and perspective.
After a final attempt that left me tongue tied and shrugging, Jamil’s sister said, “Enough. Leave it be. Do you think she has any more control over that than we do?”

“By Heaven, that’s true. What can any of us do? Damn politicians and politics!”

“All of them,” I added.

Iman had planned to go in to the city for groceries the following day, but it was shut down. Shop owners were caught between a rock and a sledge hammer when it came to keeping hours. If the Israelis weren’t enforcing a curfew, the militants were calling for a strike. How people were supposed to get their groceries or work or go to school was anybody’s guess. I spent the morning with Iman, helping her prepare the main meal, and listened while she helped her sons go over their homework. They knew what the week’s lessons were, so they simply continued reading for this day’s work. Much of what they did was rote memorization, reading and repeating, reading and repeating, until even I could have said their lessons.

“It’s the worst thing they can do to us, to keep the schools closed,” Iman told me. “If the children don’t go to school, they’ll never be successful; they’ll be ignorant and easily fooled. You can beat a man, or starve him, and he can still find a way to improve his lot. Keep him ignorant,” she shook her head, “by Heaven, that’s the worst. With any luck things will be quiet tomorrow, and they can return to school.”

All around the West Bank are stories of the extraordinary lengths teachers and students have gone to, trying to keep education alive—classes held in homes or in a different place all the time, exams given by telephone or to students in hiding. Between constant struggle and disruption, education is becoming nearly unreachable for many
Palestinian youth, and with the loss of that comes the loss of hope. Iman’s children had been lucky so far: they still had a school and teachers. Many villages were without—permanently.
CHAPTER 8

RAMADAN KAREEM

It was midsummer, and the days were long and slow, with neither weather nor activity to change them. Each morning’s sun rose bright and dry, burning off any coolness by breakfast. Into these near-doldrums Ramadan slowly appeared on the horizon of my awareness, like a ship moving through becalmed seas. It became a frequent reference in conversation—We’ll have to finish such and such before Ramadan, get that taken care of before Ramadan—and there was an increase in bustle at the big house. Mamasan’s preparations for this holiday seemed to be concerned with stockpiling food and housecleaning. I watched with interest, probing Ilham for explanations.

“Shu hadda Ramadan?” I asked. Like a small child, I was constantly asking ‘what is this’ or ‘what does that mean.’

“It is one month we don’t eat.” She replied in English.

“A whole month?” My doubtful look must have indicated the need for further explanation.

“We don’t eat in daytime. We ‘ufftar’ (break-fast) at night.” She mixed her languages whenever she didn’t know the words in English. It was through these contextual puzzles that I learned the most Arabic.

“Why?”

“Because we must. It is in the Koran.”
Ahhh. Something religious.

"The Koran says not to eat? Why?"

She thought about it for a moment, then conceded defeat. It would be better left to Abu Mazin to explain, since my ‘why’ questions demanded more than the average middle-school level vocabulary. We sought out her father on the veranda.

"Yaba," she said, addressing him with the affectionate honorific and then continuing in English, "I have brought tea, and Im Omar need you to explain Ramadan to her, she want to know." She deposited the tray on the table and departed, back to the kitchen. Abu Mazin greeted me formally, and invited me to sit.

The veranda seemed larger than its actual dimensions, owing to the fact that it was glassed-in on three sides with windows that rose nearly to the ceiling. The view was stunning, with the gold and silver domes of Al Haram and Al Aqsa and the entire southern wall of the Old City front and center. There were several houseplants, including a rubber tree grown to massive proportions, and two of Emad’s ubiquitous canaries in brightly colored cages. The furnishings were simple: several old arm chairs, a couch with a long, low coffee table in front of it, and some small side tables and low stools. The back of the couch was covered by a tapestry showing the outline of Al Aqsa mosque, and one of the tables bore a small heap of prayer rugs. This was the room where Abu Mazin fulfilled the role of neighborhood counsel, helping negotiate agreements and resolve conflicts between neighbors. It was also the room in which the men folk entertained, and each evening it was filled with a constant flux of friends and visitors, mostly young men come to visit Abu Mazin’s sons, talking and often playing backgammon. Regardless of
human attendance, the guest of honor was always the Old City itself, shining like a heavy
crown around the mountain’s brow.

We sipped tea and I watched dusk fall, first in the valley below, then across the
city, while Abu Mazin explained Ramadan’s importance as one of the Five Pillars, or
requirements, of Islam. He took the time to explain the historical and religious
significance of the fast, how long it would last (an entire lunar cycle), how the beginning
and end of each day’s fast was determined (by there being enough light to be able to
discern the difference between a black thread and a white one), how people knew when to
break their fast (a signal fired from the area of the mosque), a multitude of details, it
seemed to me, that were archaic. Threads in the dark? What’s wrong with clocks or
watches? I wondered. Of course I had more questions—whether the effect of being in a
valley or shadow changed the time of the fast, what about the brushing of teeth, did
everyone fast, even animals and children? He answered with occasional amusement and
careful explanations.

“By Heaven, ya Im Omar, you’re going to become a Muslim yet!” he said,
smiling patiently. I knew the best response to that one.

“Insha-Allah,” I replied. If God wills it. I gathered the tea glasses and bid him
thanks and goodnight.

The closer we got to the holiday, the more Maha pestered me about fasting. I
knew she was excited because this was the first year she planned to do it. It was late
morning on the day before fasting was figured to begin—the exact day depends on the
sighting of the moon—and Maha, Iman and I were sitting outside under the olive tree,
sorting lentils. Maha kept taking breaks to play with the baby in his stroller, doing laps around us and the tree, and chattering non-stop.

“Are you going to fast? I’m going to fast. Do they fast in America?” she began again, for not less than the third time that day.

“Hush-up, girl!” Iman snapped at her. “They don’t fast in America. She’s not fasting. Leave her be!”

Of course, in the preceding week I had often assured Maha that I would try to fast with her—a gesture of solidarity, for I was impressed by her enthusiasm.

“La, ya Iman. She’s going to fast. She told me so.”

Iman speared me with a glance. “No, she’s not. She can’t.”

“No, really, I want to fast with Maha,” I explained. It was the wrong thing to say.

“What, are you crazy?” she asked. “You’re not supposed to. Yama!” She raised her voice to address Mamasan, who was coming out to see what was taking us so long.

“Yama, this crazy one says she’s going to fast tomorrow.”

“By Heaven. Is that so, ya Im Omar?”

“Yes, with Maha.”

“It is good to fast, but not for you,” she explained. “You have a baby. You are nursing. No fasting for you.” Maha began to protest. “La, I don’t want to hear of it. It’s forbidden, for the health of the baby.”

Ilham joined us. She had recently taken to wearing a scarf, and it made her look both older and more vulnerable, its severity disconcerting against her youthful features. She spoke to me in English, having obviously overheard the whole discussion, and began to explain.
“You must not, because of the baby. Old people, sick people, children and women who are pregnant or have small babies don’t fast. It is too hard. My sister is too young. Children don’t have to fast. She want to try, but even Farouk didn’t do last year. It is very hard.”

“How do you do it?”

“I start to fast maybe one day or two. Then next time better. I sleep too much. It’s not good to sleep in Ramadan, but I can’t stay awake. Always I get headache. But each year is easier.”

Early the next morning, long before sunrise or even the lightening of the sky, the peaceful mountainside was battered awake by what sounded like a platoon of djinn bent on raising the devil himself. I threw a blanket around my shoulders, since the night air was damp and chilly, and went out to see what the commotion was. I could see a small group of people carrying flashlights and torches, moving along the road that twisted through the denser neighborhood below. Whooping, hollering and pounding on metal tubs, cans, drums, anything loud and noisy, a crew of men was making sure their neighbors would wake to eat before the fast began. They pounded, chanted and sang, roaming up the road and down, and then dispersed either to have their own ‘breakfast’ or go back to bed.

I tried to fast, just to see what it was like, but found I couldn’t make it past noon without sustenance; between overall weakness and a diminished supply of milk, it became obvious why it wasn’t a good idea for lactating women. Although I usually went to visit midmorning, lending a hand with cooking or whatever small chore Mamasan might permit me to do, during the first day I stayed home, and kept my daughter from
going up to play as well. Of course. Mamasan sent for me in the afternoon, requiring my presence in the kitchen, and the first thing she did after greeting us was set food out, insisting that we eat. It seemed disrespectful to eat in front of someone who was fasting. The last thing a hungry person needed, I thought, was to be around food they couldn’t eat, and the burden of hospitality should be set aside.

“La, by heaven! Thank you, but please don’t trouble yourself. We have eaten already,” I told her. As usual she simply ignored my refusal, and spoke directly to my daughter.

“Sufa, my dear, will you have tea or juice?”

“Juice, please.”

Mamasan poured a glass of cool, fruit-flavored juice—a type of mix-with-water syrup sold on the Israeli side. It was a rare thing; I had only seen fancy commercial drinks in her house once before.

“You fast,” I said, and struggled to express my misgivings. “I’m not, we’re not… We don’t want to be a trouble,” I protested again. She shook her head at me and placed a piece of her homemade bread, fresh and warm from the oven, in front of my daughter.

“I fast, it’s true, but the little ones don’t, and you should not. It’s always like that for mothers. Allah is forgiving. Tea or juice?” She smiled.

We visited, the conversation ranging over the few topics I could understand and respond to, and she allowed me—under close supervision—to help prepare some salad, a mix of tomatoes and cucumber diced extra fine, sprinkled with fresh mint and liberally spiked with lemon juice and salt. Chilled for a few hours, it was the ultimate in edible refreshment. Sufa went to play with Maha, but after a few disagreements she returned to
the kitchen where the atmosphere was less explosive. Mamasan included her in the conversation, gently questioning her, delighting in her correct grammar and pronunciation.

“Really, ya Im Omar, your daughter is cleverer than you. Listen to how well she speaks.”

When the salad was slipped into the refrigerator, Sufa and I departed, affirming that yes, we would be back later. We were invited to join them for dinner, or break-fast, and there was no refusing. Outside, the white hills glared back at the sun with all its reflected heat. The day would be miserable for someone with out water, I thought. Once home, in the cool darkness of the little house, I put my children down for a nap. The air was as thick as cotton, and I could imagine households all across the hillsides settling in for a nap, waiting out the heat of the day.

Later, after finishing up my chores, I sat on my patio, watching the afternoon light lengthen and waiting for the day to end. Silence reigned across the mountain, and, from my perspective, even in the city. The sun was nearly set, its warmth leaving the air, when Ilham stuck her head over the roof and yelled.

“Come on, get up here! It’s almost time.”

I made my way up the side of the house and the small wooden ladder that bridged the short distance between the ground and the back corner of my roof. Sufa streaked ahead, across the yard and around to the back of Mamasan’s house. I followed more sedately, baby on hip, and poked my head around the kitchen door. The small room was overflowing with people, noise, and the scent of hot, rich food, and I hovered on the edge of the hubbub, feeling awkward. Maha was sitting, rubbing eyes that had recently been
weeping, her skin pale. Mamasan and Iman were dishing up plates of rice, chicken and a thick yogurty soup while Ilham poured glasses of cold juice. Wafa was arranging a tray with food for Helwe, and negotiating with Farouk to take it down to her.

"God's life, I don't know why she won't come up here. It doesn't matter. Please, sweetie, be a good boy and carry this down to Helwe. I can't possibly make another trip down the hill. If you hurry you'll be back before the call," she wheedled, "I'll save you the breast."

"La," he refused. "I'm too tired and hungry. You go."

"Please, sweetie. For Heaven's sake."

"Don't want to."

"Enough!" Mamasan interjected. "Farouk, go. We can't be late with it. Haram. Now move it!" Then she spotted me. "Where have you been? Here, take this out to the veranda. Hurry! You're eating there tonight." She pushed a pitcher of cold juice into my hand and herded me out. The men ate on the veranda. I had always eaten with the girls in the kitchen, occasionally carrying trays as far as the door, but never entering when there was a group present. Tonight I was ushered in, and a place was made for me next to my husband. Abu Mazin greeted me, and the conversation in the room picked up again. Farouk joined us, pulling a three legged stool up by the window. It grew darker, and rather than turn the light on, we sat in the darkening room, waiting for the signal that would break the fast. Silence fell, and it seemed we listened almost with bated breath.

"Do you think we missed it?" Farouk asked.

"No. It's almost time, though," his father answered.

"Why? Are you getting hungry?" Mohammed teased his brother.
“Hungry! I’m starving. If I don’t eat soon I’ll die!”

“You think so? La, I don’t believe it. Look at the meat on your ribs.”

“Shhh! Be quiet or we will miss it, and then we’ll have to bury poor Farouk tomorrow,” Mazin ordered.

At last there was a bright flash near the mosque, and a rolling, echoing boom, and within moments every mosque in the city sent up the *wudu*thenn, calling the faithful to prayer. The fast was over. The light on the veranda was turned on, and Abu Mazin said a brief thanks. He broke his fast with dates and water, explaining it was an example that came directly from the Prophet, and that it was a healthy, light meal that would do the body more good than a heavy one. Nonetheless, Mamasan readied a good solid dinner, rich and plentiful, each night, varying the dishes and making sure there was plenty of cold juice to revive everyone. Although she made massive quantities of food, a few hours later there would be little evidence of leftovers.

I did not fast that year, and I was both relieved and embarrassed. It seemed to be quite beyond my capacity. Ilham was also right about Maha. Mamasan suggested, after the first day, that one day was enough; it had been too hard for her, and perhaps next year she would be old enough. Farouk lasted an entire week. I watched Ilham and Iman grow wan as the hours passed each day, until they would finally succumb to a nap. Mamasan would let them sleep for an hour or so, and then rouse them to help prepare the evening meal. David, who fasted without difficulty, enjoyed the evenings in company with Abu Mazin and his sons, and would spend much of the night up at their house. He had also received invitations to dine at Dar Abu Aniis, as well as with the neighbors to the south, on the other ridge. I learned from Ilham that breaking the fast together was an important
occasion, and a house was honored to have guests for the meal. Also, the fasting American was a curiosity—he must be either crazy or a good man to join with his neighbors in this difficult discipline.

The younger men rigged a sort of tent on the roof of the house, and set out chairs and blankets. They spent the time playing chess or backgammon and talking. Often there was music, usually a radio or tape, or sometimes Omar or one of his friends would play a guitar, quietly picking away the night. It seemed quite festive, almost as though a party was in progress, and wakefulness throughout the dark hours seemed to be nearly universal.

Of course, the fast is about more than abstaining from food. Tobacco, caffeine, sex, and negative behavior are all to be avoided, reinforcing the virtues of self control and charity toward others. I watched as the family members struggled with the challenges, and how they coped. They slowed down, approaching each task and each other with more patience and thoughtfulness, or at least forbearance. No matter how difficult the day was, or what might happen, there was a conscious effort to not be grumpy—not always successful, but obvious. Iman, who was usually quick to correct her siblings, seemed to be biting back her words, maintaining silence rather than speaking sharply. Mohammed, who before was seldom seen without a cigarette in hand, went through the day with a distant, almost haunted aspect, and would even delay eating in the evening in order to have a smoke first.

Since I was neither fasting nor staying awake all night, my days continued on their even keel. I rose with my children, spent the morning cooking and cleaning and playing with them. I listened to Radio Jordan, absorbing the special Ramadan
programming with its folktales of Jeha, the wise fool, and stories of the Prophet Mohammed and the early days of Islam. Afternoons frequently brought visits by Maha and Farouk. Since everyone else was fasting, and either consumed by lethargy or absorbed in prayer, reading the Koran, or even just quiet misery, my house was a safe zone where they could expend their energy. We played endless games of tic-tac-toe, hide and seek, and red-light-green-light.

Toward the end of the month, the nights took on a different feeling, becoming serious despite the fact that the fasting was easier and more routine as bodies adjusted to the demand. I heard it explained thus: there is a belief that in the latter days of the holy month there is one mysterious night—exactly which one is unspecified—on which prayers and fasting carry many times their normal value in the eyes of Allah. This night, tradition suggests, should be spent in prayer and contemplation of His goodness and glory. Accordingly, there were no more games or music on the roof or the veranda; even the younger men were subdued. After all, years worth of prayer and good deeds would be important for any soul on the balance; all the better if they could be accomplished in one night. Mazin and Mohammed even gave up tobacco for the duration, nights as well as days, which further impressed upon me the solemn nature of the occasion.

At last the month ended, and the celebration of Eid al Ftar, or the ‘breaking of the fast’ began. In some ways, this portion of the holiday reminded me of Christmas, because it included gifts for the children (mostly new clothes), special deserts and lots of visiting between friends, family and neighbors. Yet even with the festivity, some remnant of the preceding month’s solemnity remained; the prayers and discipline of Ramadan were not lightly set aside.
In each of the following six years I tried again to fast, but since I was continually either pregnant or nursing, I was never successful for more than a day at a time. By noon I would be shaking, and if I continued to fast, I would grow feverish and confused, without enough energy to even get a meal together. I found my failure disturbing, especially since I considered myself to have a strong will. If millions of people across the world could do this, why couldn’t I? Was it a lack of self-discipline or motivation? Was I just weak? It wasn’t until my return nearly twenty years later that I was at last successful.

Ramadan 2002

Arriving in late October, I was surprised to find that it was nearly Ramadan. I remembered it being in the summer, and long, hot days that sapped the strength out of fasting bodies, but here it was at the tail end of autumn. Because the Islamic calendar is lunar, holidays gradually move through the different seasons. It was a good reminder of the dual nature of Arab life: while they work and live now in standard Gregorian years, underlying these foreign months is another more flexible, flowing calendar that marks other very different days and significances.

At Dar Abu Mazin’s, the advent of the fast was unmarked. Without Mamasan around to clean and prepare, the house remained a captain-less ship, drifting through each day, a silent and nearly empty shell. Finally, on the day before Ramadan, Iman arrived to help Ilham do some cleaning. They had managed to finish their own houses and the shopping for the first few days of the fast, and had joined forces to get their father’s house in order. They went through each room with buckets and brooms, moving quickly
and in habitual motions, like old hands returning to a former post. I tried to help, but felt I was in the way rather than helping.

“What will you cook tomorrow?” Iman asked her sister.

“My husband wants mashee (vegetables stuffed with meat and rice), so I asked him to pick up some meat. Baba (Abu Mazin) said anything is fine, so I’ll just make extra and send it up for him and the boys.”

“Why don’t you just cook and eat up here? Why go back and forth?”

“No, I’d rather cook in my own house, and he wants to eat at home. We’ll come up after we eat and have dessert with him. Here, ya Im Omar, carry this rug out to the clothesline, will you?” Ilham directed me, and then tried to get down low enough to use the dustpan. Her very-near-term belly was in the way, though, and her efforts were awkward.

Iman chuckled and took the pan from her. “Here, give me that. You’re as big as a house, you can’t even reach the floor.”

“Heaven knows that’s true. I wonder how much bigger this belly can possibly get—it seems twice as big as it was last time.”

“That’s because it’s a girl.”

I carried the rug out and tossed it over the clothesline, and stopped to look over the garden. There were still blooms on the rosebushes, but they hadn’t been cared for over the summer, and though it was warm enough, there was a tang in the air that suggested a change in the weather. I walked about the garden, deadheading the roses and pulling a few weeds. Along the wall that overlooked my old house I found a clump of zaatar, an indigenous variety of thyme. I took a few leaves, crushed them between my
fingers and stood inhaling the pungent scent. I had found a store at home that actually
sold ground zaatar, but it was a poor imitation of this. This was real, sharp and bitter and
essential. This was the smell of countless breakfasts, of outings to the hillsides, of herb
vendors in the market. I carefully plucked a few dried flowers, hoping they still held
some of the almost microscopic seeds, and wrapped them in a bit of paper from my
pocket. With any luck, I would be able to coax them to life for my kitchen garden.

Ramadan arrived with a chilling wind, and the temperature dropped sharply
during the night. I was awakened before dawn by the faint sound of drums from
somewhere across the valley. There was light coming from the kitchen; someone was up
making tea and having the last meal (al suhor) before the fast. It didn’t seem worth the
effort to leave my warm nest, so I tucked the quilt up around me and snuggled back in.
After a short time the wudthen began, the opening “Allah hu akbar” blasting from a
nearby mosque on a particularly sour note. I pulled the covers up over my head. There
had been a change in the call to prayer. Where once there were only a few mosques, and
the voices had been ethereal and harmonious, now they seemed to compete, each
determined to claim space by dint of volume. It was more like another aspect of the feud
now, rather than a spiritual practice, and beauty was a misplaced or forgotten value. I
wondered how the prophet Mohammed, who had disliked the loud cacophony of church
bells, would feel about these over amplified voices. I fell back asleep as the noise wound
down, the last strains muffled by the heavy bedding.

Ilham, being pregnant, was not required to fast, and she tried to assure me that I
didn’t need to either. Neither was Mamasan fasting, due to illness, although she spent
time each day reading the Koran instead. She tried to dissuade me as well, but it was
something I felt compelled to do. She brought it up again one evening while Mohammed and I were both there.

"Don't worry. I won't be fasting in America," I said.

"Yes, but why you are fasting now?" Mohammed asked in English. "Do you think you'll be going to heaven for it?" he teased.

"No. I just... want to. I'm doing it for Mamasan, since she can't."

"By Allah," he told his mother. "She says she's fasting for you." I caught an inference in the language. He used a word that was closer to 'relieve,' as in taking a burden from someone.

"La, she shouldn't. Tell her she doesn't need to."

"No, but I want to," I interrupted. "You can't because you're sick. I can. So why shouldn't I? Besides," I switched back to English and addressed Mohammed, "I can't do anything to help, but at least I can do this. It just seems right."

"Okay, as you wish." He raised his hands in mock surrender. "Mama, I can't reason with her. Do you need my father to bring anything from the house when he comes tonight?"

"No, my love, but I want to wash before prayers. Perhaps Im Omar will help me bathe." It was a request one would make only of a daughter or son, and so I did.

I helped her walk to the shower, supporting her as much as I could, trying to soften the impact of each painful step. I helped her into the shower, and as I adjusted the water, I remembered her adjusting the water for my son's first bath, her strong, brown hands supporting his tiny, pale body, shielding his face while she gently rinsed him. I sent the warm water across her scalp and smoothed shampoo through the fragile hair, recalling
times when she had brushed and braided Sufa’s blond locks. The connection between past and present, parent and child, mother and mother, became crystal clear for a brief moment. My hands were the hands of countless generations, in all corners of the world, caring for the flesh of their loved ones.

In So Many Words

I was swept into Mamasan’s family, into their world, carried on a river of language. I was thrilled by each unfolding of meaning, a glimpse of the clarity and absolute rightness of a word or phrase, the ferreting out of an etymology or the moment when a simile or metaphor became recognizable. There were often no equivalents in my English frame of reference, and I was forced to digest chunks of religion, history and traditions completely unfamiliar to me in order to ‘get’ what was meant. Arabic and Arab life: I could not separate one from the other. This was language learned imperfectly, on the fly, yet deeply, sinking into my bones so that it became part of me. I fell in love with the melodies, the intricate patterns of meanings and usage, and the encompassing sense of language and culture as the warp and woof of a single construct.

Thoughts, exclamations, and even dreams shifted into this new idiom, and without realizing it, I absorbed many of the fears and biases of my surroundings. Bread from the Israeli stores? Inferior, unpalatable stuff; Arab bread was much better. Vegetables and fruits from the supermarket? Very poor indeed; Arab produce was heartier and healthier. I accepted these notions as truth, despite the fact that I grew up on commercially produced foods quite similar to those Israeli goods. And although it was a ridiculous transference, just walking by a group of Israeli soldiers was enough to make me break
into a nervous sweat. My daughter, growing up with the other children of the mountain,
didn’t even have former knowledge or reason to dispel these influences. I realized that
when she woke one night in the midst of a nightmare. She was crying that the jesh (Israeli
soldiers) were after her, and they were going to break down the house.
CHAPTER 9

ON BENDED KNEES

Occasionally, I would be at Mamasan’s house when it was time to pray. She would excuse herself and go to wash, then reappear, a large white scarf folded around her head and tucked tightly around her face so that not a single hair showed. Most often she would go to an unoccupied room, but if there was none, she would place a small prayer rug near the wall, facing a general east-southeast direction, and begin. Her eyes half closed, she would go slowly and gracefully through the various movements, her voice low but not whispering. Then, rising, she would return to the present, replace her special scarf with a regular one, and go back to working on whatever task was next. It was like a time-out from daily life, and even small children respected it. When someone said “Hush, Mama is praying,” all would be still until she was finished.

I wanted to know more about the salat, or prayers, but for a long time my questions were unanswered. Finally, Iman came back from school in Jerusalem one day with a gift for me. She had stopped at a book store, and found an English guide to prayer. It assumed a basic knowledge of the Koran on the part of the reader, but other than that it spelled out the rather involved process of prayer in great detail, each step and its significance described, even the correct way to wash beforehand, and with little diagrams showing the movements, followed by the appropriate verse or words to say. I practiced the movements alone at home, self-conscious and embarrassed. Although I succeeded in
memorizing several verses from the Koran, I never mastered the salat. It was awkward and unnatural to me, and again I faced my own lack of faith. It was, like the many other forms of prayer or worship I had examined, beyond my ken.

Going to the Temple, 1980

When Mamasan went to town it was never on a Friday, since that was not a good day for shopping. Some shops would be closed, and the city itself would be too busy, between Muslims going to pray at the mosque, and Israelis trying to get their last minute errands done before the Sabbath. Instead she would go during the week for groceries, and even still it was an exhausting ordeal. To go shopping was to walk nearly a mile to the Israeli bus stop, ride that bus over to the main road and from there catch another bus—usually the Arab bus—bound either to Bethlehem, which market she preferred, or to the Old City. I occasionally joined her on these trips, learning from her where the best shops were, what to avoid, how to ask for and select goods. It allowed me to see these places almost as a native, although I think it was more difficult for her when I went, for shopkeepers would quiz her about the foreigner, and would make her haggle more for the right price.

The Old City market was a harrowing thing for me. From the bus station it was a scrambling, crowded descent through Damascus Gate, swept along by heavy foot traffic pressing in on every side. Narrow stone streets, slick and treacherous, lead down to the souk, the open air market in the heart of the city—open air being perhaps an exaggeration, since the air was so musty and fetid it would catch in my throat and refuse to go further. Although they are called streets, the passages are more like alleyways or
tunnels, labyrinthine, dark and unfailingly filthy. Formed by the walls of buildings, built one against another, ancient stone stacked and crammed against ancient stone, the streets travel uphill and down, winding around with neither rhyme nor reason. Few of them would fit even a small vehicle, and during market hours they are filled wall to wall with people and goods.

There were countless little shops, and they all needed to be stocked. This was accomplished usually by a fleet of special carts. Made of wood and brightly painted, they measured about a meter (forty inches) wide and perhaps five or six feet in length, with two bicycle wheels in the front and two long handles out the back, they were much like oversized wooden crates attached to wheel barrows. The drivers pushed them at a rapid clip up and down the sloping streets, stopping or slowing them on the downhill by means of a long strip of tire bolted to the back. They would lower the handles and stomp down onto this sheet of rubber, pressing it with all their weight against the surface of the street. They gave the appearance of being out of control, skidding along the slippery stones and yelling at pedestrians to beware, although I never saw a single collision.

The shops were separated, like the population and the city, into ethnic divisions. Shops in the Jewish quarter catered to Jewish shoppers, and those nearest the city gates sold mostly tourist junk: postcards, ceramics, all manner of Marys and Jesuses in every imaginable material, cheap tee-shirts and jewelry. It was part carnival, part nightmare, as shop people competing for commerce called out their wares, guessing by their victim’s appearance what language to use. The shops in the heart of the city were Arab, both Christian and Muslim, selling the foods and goods particular to them. Shoppers could buy spices and rice from burlap bags, bread fresh from huge ovens, tea from strolling...
vendors. A few doors away, they could choose a chicken dinner while it clucked around the cage, and come back twenty minutes later for a nice, warm package of meat. There were greengrocers’ stands, with their keepers calling out, “grapes, sweetest grapes” or “sweet, ripe melon,” or “country fresh produce.” In any open space near the food market there would be peasant women, squatting behind their produce. Avoiding the overhead of a shop, they simply carried in their goods in a bundle, threw down a bit of burlap, and set up business. These women fascinated me. Often tattooed on the face, their sharp eyes saw everything. They were fearless, calling out their goods, haranguing passersby, haggling with customers and arguing with the regular shop keepers who didn’t want them near their shops. Mamasan never bought from them, although she would respond courteously when they spoke to her.

Beyond the grocers were the clothing shops, where women wistfully fingered rich fabrics, and thin-worn mothers sought and wrangled for the cheapest prices on children’s clothes and shoes. Further down in the city’s guts were tinkers’ shops that smelled like oil and grease, blacksmiths shops filled with blue-grey coal smoke and the clanging of iron, and the silent caverns of the junkmen and ragmen. And down in the quietest, most distant places were the tea shops, where old men sat about drinking coffee and playing backgammon.

Sometimes when Mamasan went to market in the city she would make the trek to Al Haram to pray, and I was lucky enough once to accompany her. We passed down through the dark, winding passages, and she stopped at several booths to ask prices, but didn’t purchase anything. She was a shrewd shopper, and I assumed she was looking for
better prices, but we continued down and out of the market area. We turned down a very quiet passage, and she turned to me.

“I am going to go pray. Will you come with me?”

“You are going to Al Aqsa?”

“No, to Al Sakhra, in Al Haram. It is beautiful inside. Will you come?”

“Is it permitted?”

“Into Al Sakhra, yes. Pull your scarf forward a little.” I did so, and she eyed me critically, then reached out to tuck a strand of hair in. “Let’s go.”

 Many of the shops we passed now were filled with images of the city and the mosques, with the words “Al Quds” (Jerusalem) and “Al Aqsa” and verses from the Koran inscribed. I had learned the characters enough that I could ‘read’ familiar words, but the calligraphy used for Koranic verses was so ornate it bore little resemblance to the letters I knew. Even Ilham admitted she could not read them. I stopped to admire a simple ceramic plate, on which the verse was clear and simple enough to read. It was Al Fahtha, the first and most common verse learned. The shopkeeper eyed me curiously.

“It’s very pretty,” I said.

“By Heaven! She speaks Arabic! Is she your son’s wife?” he asked Mamasan.

“No, she’s our neighbor,” she replied, and glanced at me pointedly. I took the hint, thanked the proprietor and we exited.

“If you want to buy anything like that,” she told me, “you should let me do it. They’ll charge you too much because you’re a foreigner.” I nodded in agreement, and we continued to the mosque. At the gate to the Temple Mount she paused and adjusted her scarf, then led me across the plaza. We stopped at a low fountain.
“This is where one washes before prayer,” she told me, and mimed the actions. I nodded, and looked around the plaza. There were people coming and going, some washing at the fountain, some deep in conversation. At the door to the Dome of the Rock we removed our shoes, and placed them together on the designated shelving, Mamasan’s plastic sandals and my hand-me-down tennis shoes contrasting as much as our very different selves. The light inside was subdued and the air was still, and people spoke in hushed voices. I had to stop to look around; it was simply too much to take in while moving.

The building was the most stunning and intricate piece of architecture I had ever seen, with colors and shapes so intense and fantastic they seemed unreal. From the outer edge, a space open and richly carpeted, the eye was drawn to the pillars and arches of polished stone rising in the center, like a temple within a temple. Above the arches, so far above the floor that it seemed as high as heaven, rose a perfect, glowing, golden dome. The outer walls were bordered with bright colored mosaics in geometric and floral patterns. Verses from the Koran, flowing like liquid gold, ran around this edge in a complicated script. In the center was a wooden enclosure, and when I started moving again, Mamasan led me to it and laid a hand on its surface.

“Beneath here is Al Sakhra, the stone from which our Prophet ascended to Heaven,” she explained sotto voce. I could only nod, wondering why and how the Prophet would have traveled from Saudia to here, and not wanting to ask. My questions were irrelevant and rude in the face of a faith that had built such magnificence. She led me around the enclosure and down to a small alcove that opened behind and below the wooden screen, and I found myself face to face with a huge stone, its rough and
undecorated surface a jarring contrast to the building around it. I smelled earth, and age, and dampness. I stood to the side and very still, watching people file in to touch to stone. If my understanding of the stories was correct, this was also the rock upon which Abraham was going to sacrifice his son. That was two brushes with divinity in the same place. The thought was unnerving, and when Mamasan completed her turn, I gratefully re-ascended to the upper floor.

Going to the Temple, 2002

I mentioned that I wanted to go to the souk to buy a few gifts to take back, and Iman offered to accompany me, since she had some errands to run.

“I also want to go to Al Haram,” she said. “Would you like to go with me?”

“I heard it was closed to foreigners.”

“It is, but maybe if we dress you properly they will let you in.” I thought about it for a moment. On the one hand, the last thing I wanted to do was draw attention to myself. On the other, it was unlikely that I’d ever have the chance to enter there again.

“Are you afraid?” she asked. I looked at her to see if she was teasing me. It was hard to tell; I’d never been able to read Iman clearly. She still did not speak English, and her sense of humor was wickedly subtle. Still, it was quite a proposition. I said yes, and Iman dug around in Mamasan’s closet for a covering that I could put on to enter the mosque. What she pulled out was something I’d never seen in this place before. Palestinian women, at least the ones I knew, wore either thobes or floor length dresses or jackets with a full scarf. They covered their hair, but not their faces, their arms but not their hands.
This outfit looked like something out of another century. It had two pieces: a long, floor length skirt and an unusual upper garment. This top piece had an opening through which the wearer could look out, but it hung in a solid sheet around her, covering head, neck, arms and hands, ending near the knees. I tried it on, and although I had to have a safety pin to hold the skirt up, Iman pronounced it acceptable. We put it in a bag to take with us and set out, walking the long mile up to the bus. The weather was grey and unsettled, with a bit of cold wind slapping about, and the shelter of the bus was most welcome.

Our arrival at Damascus Gate was greeted with a light rain shower, and the stones of the street became even more slippery. I saw a woman in a knee length dress and the ever present plastic sandals slip and fall. Traffic parted around her, and she rose quickly. She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket to wipe her hands and continued on her way. We traveled further in, and the foot traffic began thinning out. We approached the gateway to the Temple Mount, and the guards stopped us.

They were Israeli and Druze soldiers, and their job was to prevent incursions into the area by non-Muslims. They demanded Iman’s ID and my passport, and asked several questions about my address and my purpose in the country. Then they determined Iman could go through, but I could not.

“But she has come to pray,” Iman told them. “She is Muslim.”

“Is this true? Are you a Muslim?”

Now I was in for it, no matter what I said. If I said yes, I’d be a suspect and a liar, but if I said no, I’d be making a liar of Iman.

“Yes,” I said in Arabic. “I’m a Muslim. I wish to go in and pray at the mosque.”

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“This I do not believe,” a soldier said. He seemed to be the person in charge.

“It’s true.” I tried to stare him down.

“You are lying. You can’t pray dressed like that.”

“I have brought my clothes to pray in.” I pulled the dress out of the bag, which had already been searched by two different soldiers.

“You must prove it.”

“How do you prove faith?” I asked him. “All I can do is tell you this: I bear witness that there is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is His Prophet.” I repeated the Shahada, the creed of belief, and hid my shaking hands in the folds of the dress.

“Very well. You may enter.” He still looked doubtful, but they allowed us to proceed, although there was some debate between them as we left.

We stepped into a small alcove by the gate, and I threw the long garments on, careful to tuck the fabric of the headpiece tightly about my face. The plaza was wider than I remembered, and very exposed, and it seemed like it took a long time to reach Al Sakhra. I expected at any step to be stopped and escorted away at gunpoint. All remained silent. Outside the entrance to the mosque we slipped our shoes off and stepped in onto the carpet in our stocking feet, placing the shoes on the shelving inside the door. Even on the second view the building made me stop. I don’t believe one could ever take its beauty for granted. However, the carpets were a little worn, and there were some broken and chipped places in the mosaic, evidence of past violence and current distress. Times were hard everywhere, even here near the gate to heaven.

Iman, unlike Mamasan, did not stop to pray, although she also took me below to the stone where I did not stay long. She picked up a tract of some sort and was reading it
while I tried to read bits of the verses from the mosaics—a task quite beyond me, although I could pick out words here and there. We spent a long while in the mosque, walking through the quiet air, and enjoying the peace and beauty. As we began to walk toward the door, a man called to her.

“Wait, sister!”

“What?” She eyed him suspiciously.

“By Heaven, she’s American, isn’t she? Is she married?”

“Yes, this is my sister-in-law.” I was surprised how quickly the lie came to her.

“Does she have a sister? I am looking for a wife.”

“No, she doesn’t. Not a one, sorry.”

“Perhaps she has an aunt or a cousin?”

“None that I know of, but she speaks Arabic, you can ask her for yourself.”

I was still trying to understand how he knew I was American—I certainly wasn’t dressed like one—and I was not prepared to be suddenly thrown to the wolves.

“By God’s life, do you really? What a wonder, praise God. Tell me sister, do you have a cousin looking for a husband?”

“No, not a one do I have.”

“I cannot believe my eyes or my ears! Blessings on you and your children. Do you have an aunt or even a friend who would marry?”

“No, peace be upon you, I do not. Let’s go, sister. My husband will be waiting.”

I held my poise until we reached the door, and then my eyes met Iman’s and I had to cover my mouth to suppress my laughter.
Once outside, Iman suggested we continue to Al Aqsa, but I demurred. Al Aqsa had been the target of several violent attacks, two by American Jews. As the third most holy site in Islam it was a highly visible and volatile point in the conflict.

“Come on. You said you have never seen it. Don’t be afraid.”

There it was again, and this time I felt certain it was a taunt.

“All right, let’s go.”

We got no closer than fifty feet to the building before a man stopped us.

“Where are you going?” he asked, addressing Iman.

“To the mosque.”

“This one may not pass. She must leave.” He indicated me with a glance.

“She has come to pray.”

“She is not a Muslim. How did she get in?”

“She said she was a Muslim, and they let her pass.”

“How do you know her? Why did you bring her here?”

“She wanted to pray. She is a visitor,” Iman said, and shrugged, saying no more.

The keeper turned to me and spoke in English. His eyes were deep and dark, and something about him brooked no argument.

“She tells me you are Muslim. What are you doing here?”

“We came to pray.”

“Speak for me Al Fataha.”

I began from memory, “Bis mi’lah al Rahman, al Raheem…” but my hands and voice were shaking. I reversed two lines, and knew I had failed. He looked at me coldly.

“Why are you here?”
“I lived here, fifteen years ago. I used to pray then.”

“Fifteen years is a long time. You can go to the teachers, and learn again. Bring a certificate from the school and you may enter the mosque. Until then, do not return.” He marched us to gate, and we left, suitably chastened. Outside in the alcove I stepped out of the coverings, folded them carefully and placed them back in the plastic bag. We continued to the souk, where Iman took care of her errands. I followed her quietly, carried her parcels for her, and tried to be inconspicuous, impossible as that was. When she asked what I wanted to shop for, I told her I was ready to go. I wanted to put some space between myself and the Old City.

That evening I sat in the kitchen at Dar Abu Mazin, reading a draft of Ilham’s thesis. She was seeking her Masters in Education, but had set it aside a few months before, when working and pregnancy got to be too much. Since it was in English, she asked me to look it over. She finished up the dishes and sat down to pour us some tea and visit. Iman had told of her sister of our little mishap in the city, and Ilham wanted to know more of what happened. I described some of it, playing it down, but Mohammed overheard.

“What, are you crazy?” he asked. “You shouldn’t be doing things like that. You could get arrested. Do you know what happens when they find out you’ve been among the Arabs?” He proceeded to tell me in detail about the young British couple that, on exiting the country, had mentioned visiting Abu Mazin’s house. They were held forty eight hours for questioning, and then spent another twenty four in custody before they were released on an outbound flight. It had also brought a patrol to the house to ‘follow up on suspicious activity,’ but he didn’t elaborate on that. I knew I’d been foolish, but I
hadn't considered possible repercussions on the household. My embarrassment was complete.

"No, by Heaven, I didn't say this to make you feel bad," he told me. "I want to make you understand. It isn't like it was before. There is no peace, anywhere. You should try to be careful."
CHAPTER 10

HARVEST

The thump and clatter of footsteps across the rooftop gave me notice that someone—undoubtedly a young, running and skipping someone—was descending from Mamasan’s. I opened the door as Maha charged around the corner.

“A’salaam aleikum! T’aali (come with me), up to the house. My mother wants you. Now.”

“Right now? I can’t, I have to do the wash.”

“No, really, right now. We’re going to pick today. She wants you, upstairs, quick.” She picked up the baby, nuzzling and teasing him. “You want to go, don’t you? Tell your mommy, say, ‘let’s go’. We’re going to pick today!”

I had no clue what she was talking about, but I gathered up the kids and started up the hill. It did no good to refuse; Mamasan would just keep sending one person after another until someone managed to get through to me. It was a fine morning, still cool and fresh.

“Good morning, ahlan wa sahlan.” Mamasan poured a cup of tea and handed it to me. I answered back politely, asked after her wellbeing, and added, “Maha said you wanted me for something.”

“Ah, yes. We’re starting to pick today. Come and help us.”

“Pick what?”
“Olives.”

“Olives? From the trees?”

“What other kind is there?”

“What do you pick them for?” Maha, listening in, had a good snicker over that one. To me it was a perfectly logical question. I had been told as a child never to eat olives off the trees; they were poisonous. My mind had never followed up with the obvious question as to where the olives I ate came from. I was about to learn.

The men-folk had already been out since dawn. We made pots of coffee and tea to take to them, and Iman carried a heavy tray laden with bread, oil, zaatar (crushed dried herbs) and fresh yogurt. We wended our way across the dry terraces toward the section of land bordering dar Abu Ali. There were ladders leaning into several trees, and various portions of people—legs, arms, heads—visible between branches or poking through the top. Beneath the trees were spread tarps, some of plastic, some made of burlap bags sewn together.

Mamasan called to the men, “Allah give you strength,” a traditional way to greet someone working. They replied with, “Allah increase your strength,” and welcomed the extra hands and the teapot with equal enthusiasm. Abu Mazin was wielding a pruning saw on an already picked tree, taking out deadwood and broken branches. He climbed down, and Iman handed him a cup of the sweet sage-flavored tea.

“Bless your hands, my dear. Hey, Mohammed, take this saw to that branch when you’re done. Ahlan, welcome, Im Omar,” he said to me in English, and continuing in Arabic, bade my daughter, “Good morning, ya Sufa, how are you today?”

“I am fine,” she replied in the same language, and asked what he was doing.
"By heaven, listen to her speak!" he exclaimed, proudly as a grandfather. "We are picking olives. Will you help us?" He gave her a bucket, and soon had her engaged in filling it with the fallen fruits. I followed Mamasan to a tree, and began watching her hands, learning by example.

There were two or three people to a tree, one on the ladder and the others below. Although the fruits grew in a line down the small twigs and branches, it wasn’t possible to simply strip them off, because of the intervening leaves. One had to release the olives from their anchoring stems without removing leaves, a trick that required a great deal of dexterity and strength. The fingers had to seek out and seize each fruit, give it a tug, drop it and move to the next. The olives fell in a steady patter, pock-pock-ing onto the ground-cloths, pit-pittering into the buckets, sliding with a quiet whoosh from the buckets into burlap bags. From tree to earth to bucket to bag, over and over again.

It was a full family effort, with no-one excused from helping. The season was not quite a month long, and every hand was needed to get everything done. Rising early and putting in a full day of picking in the sun left everyone exhausted, yet still the regular household chores had to be done. Mamasan and Iman took an extra hour in the mornings, before they went out to the trees, to prepare food for the day and clean the house. The younger kids would come home after school, change and go out to the trees to help for a couple of hours, before returning to study and eat. There was a palpable sense of satisfaction, despite the exhaustion, as the bags piled up.

There were only a few trees remaining to be picked when I was again summoned to Mamasan’s kitchen. After tea, we went out the back door to the cave behind the kitchen. It was brimming with olives, bag after bag, boxes, cans, whatever vessel that
could be commandeered to hold them, and in the center was a small mountain of the mottled green fruits, piled high on drop cloths.

“We’re going to make olives. Do you want to make some for yourself?” she offered.

“Okay.” I looked at the pile, as tall as Mamasan, wondering what she would do with so many. There were a couple tons of them.

“Iman, show her how to choose olives. She can put them in this tub for now.” She handed me an aluminum pot that would hold about two gallons.

“Are you going to make all of that?” I asked, gesturing at the mound before us.

“You mean into table olives?” Iman laughed at the idea. “No, we’ll make oil with those. You know, olive oil, like we eat and cook with. Here, start on this side. You look for fruits that are plump and pretty, like this one.” She held out a perfect, heavy fruit.

“You don’t want one that’s spotted or bruised or too dark. Unless you’re making black olives. What kind are you making?”

“How would I know? What kinds are there?”

“Well, there are the regular green ones, like we eat every day. Or the dry black ones. And you can make them garlic flavored, or cured in salt or oil or with vinegar…”

Her list just added to my puzzle, so I asked, “What kind are you making?”

“Green.”

“Then green.”

She went to a couple of sacks leaned up against the wall and opened the first one.

“Help me move this,” she said. “We saved some of the best ones from the trees by Dar Haj Dahoud. They’re big and round and very nice.”
Together we dragged one of the bags to an open corner of the tarp and upended it. I had my pan full in a few minutes, and Iman double checked it after she finished filling a tub. She culled a few of my picks, pointing at small spots or saying the fruit was too small. I helped her fill another tub, and asked her about how oil was made.

“We take it to the press.”

“What’s a press?” It was another unfamiliar word.

She described it using words that I could grasp and draw connections from.

“It’s a big building, like a factory, with machines inside that take the olives and smash them,” she demonstrated the motion with her hands, “and squeeze the oil out.”

“Do they get cooked?” I asked, trying to imagine the process.

“No, not cooked, but they do use heat to get all the oil out. The best oil comes from the first pressing. The oil is out into big cans, like the ones in there,” she gestured to the small pantry/cave. I had poured oil out of those cans—they held at least five gallons, and were hard to manipulate. Iman continued, “We always have enough oil for ourselves, and usually we can sell some. It’s expensive to buy, though, so it’s more important to keep enough at home.”

We finished sorting the bag, then she pulled a couple of large flat stones and two smaller ones from the pantry cave, and three empty plastic crocks.

“Now we place the olive here,” she said, laying one on a stone, “and we tap it like this, so that it cracks just a little. Not too hard, or you’ll split it wide open.” She suited action to words, showing me the technique a few times, and the passing me a pair of stones. I placed an olive on the big stone and tapped it gently, then picked it up to examine it. Nothing. I tapped it again. Not a crack, not a scratch. I hit it a third time and
split the little fruit in half, smashing part of it into a pulp. Iman snickered. I ruined several more before she stopped me. She left and returned from the kitchen with a small knife.

"Try this instead. Just put two small slices through the skin, like this." She demonstrated deftly, two little nicks on opposite sides of the fruit and a quick toss into the waiting crock.

The knife worked far better for me, although it was a while before I was as quick at slicing as she was. When opened, the olives leaked a bitter emulsion that made them slippery, and turned my fingers almost black. I went through my pan, and began helping Iman. It was, like so many of the things the women did during the day, slow, labor-intensive work. We rinsed the cut olives, poured the water out and rinsed again. Then we filled the containers once more with fresh water and covered the tops.

"Tomorrow we rinse them again," she told me, "and then each day for a week. It washes the bitterness away. After that we make the olives and set them aside to age. You'll need to get a few things for the next step though." She gave me a list of things I needed: a big glass or plastic container with a lid, a package of salt, lemons, peppers and vinegar.

On the day she was ready to put the final touches on the olives, I took my container and ingredients up to Mamasan's. I was excited at the prospect of making olives, eager to watch and learn. She set the water out in a huge pot, and began adding salt, copious amounts of it, tasting the brine a few times until it met her approval. Then she added lemon juice and 'spirit of vinegar,' tasted it once again, and pronounced it ready. Into the containers went a quartered lemon, a sliced pepper, a layer of olives and then brine. It alternated thus until the container was full, with about an inch of liquid
covering the fruit. Into some jars she added bay leaves or garlic, varying the recipe according to her own taste and experience. To keep the olives below the surface and away from the air, a glass saucer was laid on the top, and then the container was closed and put in a cool, dark place. I took my filled container—a brand new, three gallon, bright red plastic jug, purchased for the purpose in the Bethlehem market—home and stashed it in a corner. The process was like alchemy, transforming an inedible substance into an everyday food item, and it was reassuring to see that big container waiting. It would take at least two months to cure, but when they were done, I would have olives in plenty, enough to last the year.

Harvet 2002

The morning had been beautiful and cool, its golden light filtered and slow to move through slightly dusty air, but it had rapidly heated once the sun was well up over the ridge. We were on the west side, nearest Dar Abu Aniis, picking the trees on the higher terraces. The men—Abu Mazin, Mohammed and Emad—had been steadily progressing around the bottom of the land for the last week, finishing each day a little higher up and a little closer to the house. My hands and clothes were thoroughly begrimed; there had not been an autumn rain to rinse summer’s dust from the trees. It was not a good year for the olives. The fruits were small, and several trees were nearly barren. The family worked silently, except for the children, who played as they worked, engaging in a competition to see who gathered the most, each action narrated by unending chatter.

“Look, look, my bucket is already full!”

“It’s half full of leaves and trash, silly. See, mine is full of olives, not junk.”
"I can't help it, it's all mixed together."

"Dump it out and start over."

"No, you just want to be ahead."

"Uncle, let me up on the ladder."

"Stop throwing olives on me."

"I want to climb up and pick from the tree."

"I'm tired."

Iman finally had enough, and snapped. "Hallas! Enough! Either be quiet or go play somewhere else." Peace descended for a brief time on the hillside, as the children took themselves out of earshot, back to the house and out of the sun. The afternoon wore on, hot and bright. Down the hill and over, below Dar Abu Aniis, I could see others picking olives, and I imagined all the hillsides being harvested, the olives piling up in mountains, oil pouring from the presses. If I were to choose a symbol for the land, it would be the olive tree. Like the Palestinians, and even the Israelis, the tree survives without a lot of pampering, and what it produces is surprisingly rich. The groves that cover the open areas have been there for generations, their gnarled, ancient branches reaching back into the past, tying the people to the land and to the distant forbearers who planted them. Olives are the single most important crop for the Palestinians, and the harvest has major cultural, economic and even religious meaning for them.

"There won't be much extra this year," Mohammed's voice came from the top of the tree, speaking English. "It's not a good year. Last year, there was a surplus of olives, and nobody dared to touch them; the situation was so bad that a woman and two children
were shot and killed by the army, killed right in their own orchard, while they were picking. After that, people were afraid to go out.”

“Why were they shot?” I asked, and wondered if he was trying to make me nervous.

“Because there was a curfew. Because they were there. Because they were Arab. Who really knows?” His answer was bitter, and silence fell again.

Maha had arrived from Bethlehem in the early afternoon, tired and angry. She had come through the checkpoint on her way into Jerusalem, and it had been hellish, with long lines, hot sun, and rude soldiers. They had made her undress her tiny daughter, just seven weeks old, all the way down to skin. Once used by the Israelis after any ‘incident’ to block the flow of traffic between Arab areas, the checkpoint was now a formal border between the recently established ‘autonomous’ area and Israel ‘proper.’ It was not a truly national boundary, but it ensured that legal passage into Israel was closed to Palestinians without the appropriate identity card. Maha was one of the ‘lucky’ ones, an Arab with Israeli identity papers—not to be confused with citizenship—but her husband was not, so when she visited her family she went alone. She maintained a Jerusalem identity card and had chosen to have her children in an Israeli hospital, claiming Jerusalem residency, so that they would also be eligible to have Jerusalem identity cards. Without the cards, they would have been unable to travel outside of the areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority. Still, card or no card, the passage was not easy for an Arab. It had taken over two hours to travel seven miles, and Maha was absolutely furious.
“By Allah, every time I cross I swear I won’t do it again. If it hadn’t been so long since I saw Mama I would have just turned around.”

“Dogs, I know, sweetie, they’re just dogs,” Wafa sympathized, “but hush now, before you give your daughter a stomach ache. You can’t nurse when you’re upset.” We were seated around the edge of the bed in the big bedroom at Mamasan’s, talking while Maha nursed her child. Wafa had stopped by on her way home to say hello to her sister-in-law, and to invite us down to her house for dinner.

“I know they make it hard on purpose, and I try not to get angry. It’s just...maddening.”

“Never mind,” Wafa soothed again. “You can avoid it on the way back, if you get someone to drive you around to the west. I’ll ask Musab.”

After lunch, Maha was anxious to get to the hospital to see her mother. We talked while we waited for Abu Mazin to return home, catching up a little on each other’s lives. She could speak more English now, but we still conversed in Arabic. I could see her occasionally stop and puzzle over one of my mangled sentences. It had been a long time, and the little girl I had known was long gone. I learned that Maha had gone to college, getting a two year degree in radiology, but had married after working only six months. She felt fortunate in her marriage, saying he was from a good family, but I had the feeling that she didn’t like being so far from hers—not that seven miles is a great distance, but it was often impassable.

We went, as soon as Abu Mazin arrived home, to the hospital, driving through the hellish afternoon traffic, out and around the outer edge of the city and into the hills on the other side. The only available parking was a good piece away, at least a quarter mile
down the road, and walking the shoulderless, narrow strip of pavement, with a constant stream of traffic zipping by, was not only nerve wracking, but bordered on crazy. It was almost a relief, at least for me, to pass through the one-way door to the security gate, and enter the queue. Maha grasped her daughter more tightly, and I hoped that this would not be a repeat of the check-point for her. I was familiar now with the security process, holding out my passport, stating my destination, opening any parcels for inspection, and I went through quickly. I stepped off a few yards and turned to wait for Maha and her father. They were soon through without any difficulty, and with a quiet sigh of relief I followed them up to the room.

“Hey, ya Amina, your daughter is here, and your granddaughter,” Abu Mazin announced as he opened the door. Maha and her mother exchanged kisses and greetings. I could hear a certain tightness in Maha’s voice, her emotions running closer to the surface than usual. It had been almost two months since the baby’s birth, and Mamasan had not yet met her; between surgeries and setbacks and closures of the border, there had been fears that she might not ever. Maha unwrapped her infant daughter from the outer blanket, smoothed the soft dark hair, and presented her to her grandmother, tilting her up to be seen.

“Here’s your granddaughter. Hey, sweetheart, wake up and see grandma, wake up.”

“La, haram, don’t wake her. She’s tired from the traveling.” Mamasan reached out and took the baby, first looking deeply at the soft little face, then drawing her near and breathing in her scent. She laid the tiny girl across her chest, holding her as though this moment would have to last forever. They remained perfectly still for a long, long time,
Mamasan leaning back against the pillows, her eyes closed, and the child sleeping, snug in her arms.
That winter brought cold and rain like I had never experienced. I put more layers of plastic over the windows and zipped the sleeping bags together over the blankets, but the thick walls held the cold and moisture in. Mold bloomed in a rainbow of colors on the stone and plaster walls, and when wiped off, it would be back within a few days. Even turning the gas burner on did nothing to dry or warm the room, although I could warm my fingers if I held them near.

One day, not long after I had seriously considered moving back into the tent because at least it could be warmed, David brought home an ancient kerosene heater. I’d never seen one before, but within moments of lighting it, I was convinced it was the most wonderful invention ever made. It spread a gentle glow of heat out into the room, and gradually removed the chill. Within a few hours, the room was warm for the first time since fall, and after a week or so, it had cooked out enough of the moisture in the walls that the mold quit growing so wildly. It would burn for over two days on a liter of kerosene, if kept on low and turned off at night, so it was affordable—more or less. Mamasan didn’t approve of keeping the house so warm, because, according to conventional wisdom, it was going in and out of different temperatures that made you sick with colds. To me it was a welcome and needed relief, although I found that after a
On one occasion, when it had been raining without respite for three days, and would undoubtedly continue the same, it seemed that a change was needed. The gray of the sky had soaked into the little house until it was as dark and dreary as a jail cell. Sufa and I had exhausted our interest in reading and games, had even tried to make oatmeal raisin cookies in a covered frying pan, and were getting tired of each other's company.

"Shall we go up to see Mamasan?" I asked her—needlessly, since it was always her favorite thing to do. A smile broke across her face like the sun itself, but she nodded in a measured, dignified way.

"Okay," she agreed. "And we can take a cookie for her. And one for Maha. And Farouk. And Ilham."

The results of our experiment were barely edible, but she wrapped them up in plastic, excited to share the treat. I put one more layer on the baby, since it was sure to be colder at the big house, and we put on our jackets and went out into the insistent rain. We trudged uphill, looking for solid stones to step on and trying to avoid the puddles, and taking the hard packed path around to the main entrance rather than cutting through the soaked, sticky mud of the garden. The scent of tobacco and a low rumble of voices slipped out through a slightly open window on the veranda. The men were sitting there, talking and smoking the water pipe. I ducked a little so that my head was lower than the window, trying to be unnoticeable.
As we passed the kitchen window—back in women’s territory—I paused to call “A’ salaam aleikum” through it, as a kind of advanced warning, and continued around to the back. We came across Emad out behind the kitchen, and he and I spoke simultaneously, my “Greetings” and his “Welcome, come in” meeting halfway and falling to silence. He was inside the mouth of the cave, kneeling just out of the drip line, trying to light a pan of black coal. He blew on it with a small bellows, getting the coals to spark and glow. The smoke peeled away and hung heavily in the damp air.

“What are you burning?” Sufa asked him, stepping out of the rain to watch.

“I’m lighting some coals, to warm my hands.” He held his hands over the brazier for a moment to illustrate. “Come feel how warm it is.”

“La. It smells bad.” She fanned her stubby fingers and wrinkled her nose. “We came to see Mamasan.”

“Then please, by all means, go in. She’s just inside.”

We stopped at the door and knocked. It was cracked open a few inches, and Mamasan called for us to enter. The house was cold, but the aroma of something garlicky and warm teased through the air. Mamasan had pulled her ancient black sewing machine out into the liwan, where a fluorescent light provided illumination against the dark day, and was rhythmically working the treadle, catching up on the mending. Sufa placed the plastic wrapped cookies on the cabinet of the machine.

“What do you have there, sweetie?” Mamasan asked.

“We made…” Sufa didn’t know the word in Arabic, and looked at me for help.

“Biscuits?” I offered, using the British term.

“Something tasty,” she amended.
I had no sooner settled onto a chair and unwrapped the baby than Maha swooped in to take him, carrying him off to play. “Come on,” she said to Sufa, “I want to show you a new game.” They disappeared into the next room.

“What is this ‘something tasty’ you made?” Mamasan asked me.

“We call them ‘cookies.’ They’re like small cakes but drier. These have raisins, but you can make them with chocolate or vanilla. Try one. They aren’t very good because I don’t have an oven, though.” She bit into the hard little thing and grimaced.

“Iman!” she called. “Bring some tea.”

“They’re hard,” I said, “but they’re not supposed to be.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said. “It’s sweet. It will be good with tea.” Iman brought in the teapot and glasses and poured a cup for each of us, and we sipped the syrupy hot liquid and talked a bit.

“Is there anything I can help with?” I asked, gesturing at the pile of mending.

“No.” Then she thought for a moment and added, “Unless you’d like to take the buttons off these shirts.” I nodded and she handed me a couple of shirts and a pair of worse-for-the-wear scissors with one tip broken off an inch shorter than the other. She went back to sewing, pumping the treadle vigorously, and I began sawing and picking at threads with the dull edge. Iman picked up a skirt she was hemming.

Wafa, Mazin’s wife, came out from the small bedroom, looking as though she’d been resting. “May Allah grant you strength,” she said, indicating the pile of clothes to be mended. Wafa was strikingly pretty, and catlike in her insistence on being petted. She was quick with her words and her wit, and always dressed up, with her hair and face done, even when she mopped the floors.
"By Heaven, it's cold in here, Auntie. Do you want me to light a heater? You must be freezing. Look, Im Omar’s nose is red."

"No, my dear. It’s fine in here. Im Omar just came in from outside. Have a cup of tea; it’ll warm you." There was an ongoing tension between their household management styles; Wafa liked her creature comforts, and saw no reason to suffer their lack, while Mamasan was used to making do with next to nothing. Wafa parked her velvet clad self on a chair, and then started in on a story about the wife of someone and her choice of cabinetmakers. The story’s meaning eluded me, but she told it dramatically, with plenty of flair and hand movements. Emad came in carrying the brazier, which at last was well lighted and putting off more heat than smoke, and Wafa stopped her story abruptly and addressed him.

"By Heaven, ya Emad, you are a sweetheart. You’ve brought that in for us."

"No, it’s for the veranda. Come open the door for me, please."

"La, by heaven, it’s too cold in here. Leave it, so we don’t freeze.” Her voice was compelling, rich and sweet like caramel.

"You can take it up with your husband, if you want,” Emad answered, “but he wanted it out there for his guests.” Iman opened the door to the salon for her brother, and he went through, leaving a trail of almost visible warmth. Wafa remained in her spot, disgruntled.

"Hey, ya Im Mazin, hey!” Helwe’s discordant call suddenly cracked through the kitchen window, and her hard plastic sandals could soon be heard scraping on the doorstep.
"A’salaam aleikum,” she yelled as she squeezed in without opening the door any wider. “Aleikum a’salaam” was the reply. Iman took Helwe’s shawl and hung it on the hook by the door, while Wafa rose and embraced the old woman, greeting her effusively. I stood up to say hello, then took a small stool and scooted over against the wall, leaving the chair for her.

"Pour some tea, Iman,” Mamasan directed.

"No, by Heaven, nothing, thank you!” Helwe interjected.

"No, that won’t do. Have some tea, at least.”

"No, nothing.”

"For Heaven’s sake! Drink something.” It was an ongoing battle of politeness. As hostess, Mamasan had to provide either beverage or food, but Helwe always refused, making it difficult.

"Shall I make some coffee, Auntie?” Wafa broke in smoothly. “You’d have a cup of coffee, wouldn’t you?” Helwe’s refusal was less adamant. “For Allah, Auntie, and for me, just a little cup. And you can read my cup for me.” It was a clear appeal to Helwe’s vanity. Not only was coffee a ‘special’ drink, but Wafa was making even more of it by asking the old lady to read her fortune.

"Yes, you’ll have coffee,” said Mamasan. “Iman, please make some, and use the blue cups.” I went into the kitchen to help Iman, pulling the tiny cups and saucers from the highest shelf and setting them on a tray while she brewed the dark liquid, standing over the burner, stirring and lifting and stirring again. Arab coffee is not like the watery stuff drunk in America. It comes in a finely ground powder, flavored usually with cardamom or other spice, and is scooped into the pot loose, brought almost to the boil
three times, sweetened heavily (except at funerals) and poured, grounds and all, directly into small, fancy, handle-less cups. It’s almost repellently thick and potent, and quite expensive in comparison to tea. It was like a ritual; each movement each time was the same—the rise of the caramel colored foam, the lifting of the pot, just so far off the flame; the cut of spoon through foam, releasing the biting scent of coffee to rise with the steam, lowering the pot and repeating it all again. Iman placed the pot on the tray and covered it with a saucer to keep the heat in. She allowed it to settle for a minute, then carried the tray out. She poured the coffee, offering to Helwe first.

“Just a drop, dear,” Mamasan told Iman when she went to pour her cup. “It’ll give me a headache.”

Wafa sipped her coffee, testing the temperature, then when it cooled enough, she tossed it down. She spun the cup about in her hand and flipped it upside down on the saucer, and placed it on the small table before Helwe. Iman did the same. The old lady drank her coffee slowly, savoring the heat. Finally she set her cup down and reached for Iman’s. Not everyone can read the grounds, but Helwe had a reputation for it, having predicted a number of occurrences accurately. She looked at the pattern of grounds in Iman’s cup.

“Here,” she said, “is a road. You will go on a journey. And you will have much work to do.”

“At least that’s certain,” interjected Mamasan. “If the rain doesn’t stop soon, we’ll be buried in laundry!”

“And mine, Auntie,” said Wafa, looking excited. Helwe picked up the cup. She looked at it, then at Wafa, then back at the cup.
“Here is a shape, a bundle. You will have a son; in fact, you will have several children. You will work and raise your children.”

“La, by Allah,” Wafa answered, “I don’t want to hear about more of the same. Tell me I’ll be rich. Tell me I’ll drive a car and travel to America or France. Don’t say I’m going to stay here and have baby after baby!”

“You asked.” Helwe put the cup down. “Some would be happy to have a son, crazy girl. Here, let me see yours.” She reached for my cup and turned it upside down onto the saucer.

“No, thanks. I don’t want to know.”

“You don’t want to know? Then never mind. Allah is the only one who can really know, anyway, may his blessings fall upon this house, and upon you and your children.” She chatted with Mamasan for a while, finished her coffee, and then took her leave. Wafa went back into the bedroom, leaving the room without comment.

“Does she really see all that in the coffee grounds?” I asked.

“Allah alone knows the future. People make of it what they may. All the same, Helwe is clever. Pass me the scissors, please,” Mamasan replied.

“I know the future,” said Iman. “Babasan is going to come through the door in a little while and wonder where dinner is. I’m going to warm the soup.”

“Bless your hands, my dear. Would you make some fresh tea for him, too?” Mamasan picked up the mending again, and silence returned, punctuated only by the measured slap-slap of the treadle.

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Strength Rising

“Come here, sweetie, come and have dinner.” Ilham was futilely trying to cajole her youngest son, Husni, into eating some dinner. His refusal, nonverbal but categorical nonetheless, seemed to dismay her. We were in her kitchen, in the small house she and her husband had built attached to Helwe’s old place.

I tried to lighten the mood, saying jokingly, “He’s not hungry right now. He’ll want something later, after you’ve put everything away and cleaned the kitchen.”

“By Heaven, I wish he would, but he doesn’t,” she replied in Arabic, then switched to English so the boy wouldn’t understand, “He don’t eat nothing today. He is like this since my mother go into the hospital, don’t eat nothing, don’t listen to anyone. She is the only one he listen to. Now he don’t listen to anyone. I wonder sometimes what I must do.”

“He is pretty stubborn. I saw the older kids trying to get him to come home earlier. They had to pick him up and carry him, and he was yelling and kicking. He wasn’t crying, though.”

“No, he don’t cry. He is very strong.” She switched back to Arabic and addressed him again. “Look, come see how nice this is. Oh, my, it’s so good,” and she pretended to eat a bite of it.

“Give me some, too,” I said. “Oh, that’s so tasty!”

The boy approached the table, watching me measuringly, and sidled up to his mother. He eyeballed the food, but when she reached for him he ducked and ran out the door. She called him and he ignored her, sprinting up the hill and away.

“You’re going to have your hands full when the new baby comes,” I told her.
“He is so stubborn. He is too difficult.”

“You mean misbehaving? Children always do, especially when there’s a new baby in the picture.”

“No, it’s not that. All of the children are like this now. You can not talk to them. They are akwa (stronger and more forward), more than any others. Each generation seems to be akwa from the last, and this one, by Heaven...they are the strongest yet. You can’t talk to them, because they don’t listen. They don’t care what you say.” She spoke slowly now, and thoughtfully. “They don’t get embarrassed. They are not afraid, not of their parents, not even God. I am afraid for them, of what will become of them.”

“Do you think it’s because of the troubles?”

“It may be. Allah alone knows.”

I gave Ilham’s words a lot of thought over the next weeks. The children of the mountain still seemed children, at least on the surface, but when I spoke with them, the topics revolved around fearful things: soldiers, tanks, guns, prisons. Even their games echoed the violent world in which they lived, and it was no wonder, for there was no escaping the reality of it. I found no home untouched. Everyone had stories of a family member injured, killed or jailed, and this was a moderate community. Conditions had torn the very fabric of society, rending hope and innocence with it.
While the market in Jerusalem had more in the way of variety and its own eccentric ambience, when Mamasan introduced me to the market in Bethlehem, I found it much preferable, despite the longer bus ride. Unlike the dark, almost subterranean feel of the Old City, Bethlehem market was truly ‘open air,’ although on catching a whiff of it, one would have wished for a bit more air. Because it was located right in the center of town, completely paved, surrounded by buildings and cut off from the mountain breezes, the market could be stifling. In the heat of summer, the sun beat down heavily on anything not shaded, and the stench of rotting produce seemed to emanate from the very stones. Still, it was far cleaner than the Old City, and less crowded. Plus, the people were more polite.

It was in the oldest section of town, so the roads were extremely narrow, and perforce, in the age of automotive traffic, one way. One entered the market section on the west end, on either of the two tiny streets that snaked around. These main drags were crossed every so often by even narrower alleys or ‘streets’, and eventually joined at the bottom of the market area, in a single road that exited on the east end. There were no sidewalks, so the thoroughfares were shared by cars, trucks, pack animals and pedestrians. Stores that carried dry goods and sundries lined the streets and small alleyways that connected them, wall against wall with no space, no greenery visible.
Most of them were family owned businesses, and it was common for the owners to live right above their shops, although a more claustrophobic setting I couldn’t imagine. Like hiking through a slot canyon, those narrow streets made me uneasy, knowing there was no where to go but forward. I would walk and keep one ear turned to listen behind me for some vague, unrealized threat, hoping that if I heard it coming, I could outrun it.

Most of the greengrocers’ stalls were clustered in a central square, right in the middle of the market area. The established stalls were semi-permanent constructions of iron or wood, covered sporadically by flaps of canvas, and set in two long rectangles, one inside the other. Outside of that ring were dozens of temporary stands, set up on boxes or small carts, as well as a few peasant women with their bundles. Mamasan had her favorite vendors, but she generally would shop around as we passed to and fro among the stalls. She spent time looking at the quality and asking prices, and once she knew which stall had the best of each, and which she preferred (cheaper or better), she simply walked up and called for a bag from the grocer. She would load it carefully but quickly, hand it in for weighing, and pay, no-nonsense, no fuss.

Some women dickered with the vendors, whining and cajoling, and it always sounded just one step short of an argument to me, with insults, lies and high drama.

“I swear, sister, that’s two shekels less than I paid for it.”

“La, by heaven, sir, that’s far more than Abu so-and-so offered.”

“Fine, go to Abu so-and-so and buy.”

“No, my brother, he has no more. I must have this today; my son is returning from the hospital, my mother-in-law is ill. Allah knows I can’t afford to pay more than 5 shekels.”
“What are you trying to do, drive me out of business?”

“A charitable heart is pleasing to heaven.”

On and on it would go, all over a few pounds of fruit or vegetables. While it may have had a measure of amusement or entertainment for those involved, I preferred Mamasan’s straightforward style. Because she took the time to compare and know the market, she knew what was an appropriate price, and I only saw her walk away once from a vendor who tried to cheat her.

On one of our visits to Bethlehem, she surprised me with some unscheduled sightseeing. I had been to the market with her several times, and had pretty much gotten a handle on where everything was and how it all worked. Before we began shopping, though, she stopped at the top of a street we usually didn’t go down.

“What have you ever seen the Kineesa of the Birth?” she asked me.

“No. What’s that?”

“It’s the place where Sayedna Issa was born. It’s a kineesa, where the messehine pray. Come on. You should see it.” She set off down the hill, toward the Plaza. We followed the road as it rolled and zig-zagged through the center of town until we came out on the edge of a large parking lot. I had driven out through the plaza before, since it was the easiest exit from the market, but had never stopped. It was usually quite packed with cars and tour busses, waiting for their passengers to return. On the right hand side were a number of shops selling tourist junk, on the left was the police station, and on the other, straight across the parking lot, was a hulking grey building. It was large, old and very ugly, with only a small hand lettered street sign shaped like an arrow that pointed to it, on which was written “Church of the Nativity.” I had heard of it, and now realized that
a kineesa was a church. Issa, then, was Jesus, and messehine were Christians—all words that had been missing from my vocabulary.

Mamasan led me to a small opening in a very plain, very high wall. In order to pass through, a person had to bend almost in half, and walk a couple of steps through the thick wall. We came out the other side into a courtyard, and followed the general direction of foot traffic into the shade of a building, and through a tall doorway. It was indeed a church, but a very ancient one, and not similar to any I had ever been in. The room we stood in was a large open hall, with no benches or pews to indicate its purpose, except that at the far end was a raised altar, strung around with ornate lanterns, crucifixes and icons of Mary and Jesus. The ancient timbers of the roof were supported by simple stone pillars, worn by centuries to a rich, glossy patina. We moved across a battered wooden floor toward the altar, passing what looked like trap doors. I peeked down into one and saw a mosaic, meaning that the entire floor I was walking on was laid over an even older floor that had been elaborately decorated. It was all so very ancient, so worn, and the silent air smelled of dust and candles and sweet incense.

We went up the side of the altar, through a small doorway and down several steps to a cave. There were several people in the small area—a woman with a black lace scarf, down on her knees before, eyes closed, a steady whisper issuing from her lips, one on their knees at an altar, another lighting a candle to add to a candelabra where several others were already burning. Mamasan seemed to be waiting for me to make some sign of recognition, perhaps to light a candle or pray, but I merely stood, observing the others and the place, and puzzling over something. This was supposed to be the exact spot where Jesus was born. In all the versions I’d heard, the birthplace had been a stable. I had
seen hundreds of images of a palm-thatched structure with a brilliant star hanging over it, a warm light emanating from its doors and windows. This was not a stable. It was a cave that, without the warmth of those candles and lanterns, would have been cool and damp. And it struck me that Mamasan’s goats slept in a cave no bigger than this, and that her sons still slept, at least in the summer, in a cave made of the same limestone. The images had been hopelessly twisted, filtered through a very different cultural and environmental perspective, but the underlying idea remained.

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New Perspectives

At the end of a year, we received word that Ali, who owned the house we were staying in, would be bringing his family back to the mountain to live. It was strange and unbelievable, because few people who went to the U.S. and prospered ever returned. We questioned whether it wasn’t the same old fear that we were Jews trying to steal the land, but the point was moot. We had eight weeks to find somewhere to go. I hated the idea of leaving the mountain, and my extended ‘family.’ I feared that once again I would be alone and rootless. However, David had been working on a large construction project in Bethlehem, and after making some enquiries, he found a place to rent there. When I saw the house, I was overwhelmed by emotions that teetered between excitement and fear, with a little bit of something like avarice thrown in.

It was new, bright and clean, built in a contemporary, almost American style by a farsighted Bethlehemite, specifically to rent out to foreigners. I walked through the house unbelieving. A bathroom! A real, white-tiled bathroom with a toilet, an honest-to-god tub and shower, a sink and mirror. No more trekking across the hillside to the outhouse. I
turned the water tap, and within a minute there was hot water spilling into the sink. No more bathing in a plastic tub on the floor. No more carrying water to heat on the burner, or squatting in the sun over a tub of laundry. Oh, did I want to live there, in this splendid comfort! But the rent was so high. Sure, David had a good job right now, but it was construction, and the end result of construction is that you work yourself out of a job. If we moved into this place, how long before we would be broke and living out of the truck again? Unhesitatingly, David signed the papers, and within the week we had moved in. My fears were unfounded, for we stayed five years in that house.

The first weeks were an adjustment. Sufa missed her friends from the mountain, and was bored and lonely. Omar was used to having me in sight all the time, and would toddle around and search for me if I left the room, his little voice echoing through the empty space. And it was really empty. We had a regular house, but none of the accoutrements that usually accompany one. No refrigerator, no stove, oven, or washing machine; no couch or bed. Our furniture—if it could be called that—consisted of two foam pads to sleep on, a fold up picnic table that seated four, two wicker chairs without cushions, harvested curbside on trash day on the Israeli side, and a couple of boxes of books. And I still had the little radio, which was good, for otherwise I’d not have heard another adult voice for days.

We had landed in an upper class neighborhood, and the upper class in any culture is notoriously slow to warm up to newcomers—especially riff-raffy looking ones. If we hadn’t been American, and as such a curiosity and somehow outside the usual hierarchy, the neighbors would probably never have spoken to us. As it was, it took a good, long while, and then it was the children who took the first step—at first from a distance,
watching each other covertly, then showing off for each other, and then finally talking and playing together. The first time I heard other voices outside the window, I peeked out cautiously. There were two dark heads and two blond ones, sitting on the concrete walk, the dark ones belonging to the little boys from next door. I knew their names, for I had often heard the neighbor calling them. I was both pleased and nervous, but the fact that Sufa spoke Arabic and knew all the regular games made it easier for her to fit in and hold her own. Soon, there were several children who would come over and play, although never in a group, because while they might play with the ajnabeeya, they didn’t play with each other.

Bethlehem taught me more about class structure than I ever knew existed. The primary social divisions were religious. The city had a substantial and powerful population of Christians, but they seemed to be in some kind of competition. The children of Greek Orthodox families did not play with the children of Catholic families. The more urban ‘city people’ did not socialize with the rural folk. And the rich and the poor, although they might brush in the aisles at church, did not otherwise acknowledge each other. In addition to these divisions, there was the Muslim portion of the population, larger but less entrenched in the municipal power structure, and just as divided. Some of the Muslims were long time residents, with extended family connections and wealth. Many more were poor and displaced, living in one of the refugee camps. Contrasts between religion, wealth, politics, ethnicity, family and commerce all combined to make Bethlehem more like a microcosm of all possible differences than a town of neighbors.

The hills around my new home were gentler that those near Jerusalem, smaller and more easily compassed. We lived on one of those small hills at the edge of town.
Beyond us to the north was only one house, the landlord's, and the swath of between us was wide and rough. From our roof the road to Jerusalem was visible, as was the hill called Jebel Abu Ghanem, the single fully forested hill in the area. To the east the land dropped down, down to the low desert of the Jordan Valley, although hills rose between that blocked the view. I could also see the steep flanks of Herodion, a fortress/palace built by Herod back in biblical times. To the south was the city proper, although a small valley dipped between. Houses crusted the upper portions of the hills like so many barnacles, but the lower ends and the wadis were left open. Sheep grazed in the low places, and olives grew on plots of land long held by families, land treasured for its ability to produce, valued for its beauty and carved deep with tradition. Land was wealth, insurance and status all in one. Boundaries were carefully marked, each plot outlined with a wall built no more than waist high, dry-stacked and rugged, the stones pulled from the very fields themselves. In some places were small stone towers, perhaps twenty or thirty feet high. They dated, I was told, from a time when the local farmers needed a safe place from which to watch over their fields and flocks, back when wolves and raiders roamed.

I loved to go out walking, sometimes around the hills and sometimes down to the wadi. I would take the children down the road past the nearby convent, following it until it changed from road to track to trail. White limestone rocks were laid flat in places, and I learned that these flat sections had once been part of a network of trails or roads that had linked villages, supporting a trading/herding/agrarian economy. We would branch out, following one path, then another, criss-crossing the slopes as we wandered. In the spring the weeds would come up green and thick, flowers would bloom madly, and to walk across the craggy hills on this soft colorful carpet was almost mystical, but in the summer
it was barren, empty almost blighted, plants and soil alike baked to a frail crisp. Still, it was a landscape that pulled me out into it, walking and discovering, no matter the season.

Gone From the Hills, 2002

The bus route home from the hospital followed the curving spines of the mountains, occasionally dropping midway down from the crowns and swinging wide on the skirts, but always climbing back again. After a few trips, I began to recognize areas that I had known before. As the bus followed its route around the southernmost loop, I saw the tall white boxes of Gilo, a settlement that had been an unofficial dividing line between the open lands and Jerusalem. It was bigger now—no empty space remained—but its aggressive stance on the mountain top was unmistakable. The bus passed below, entering a commercial district that once had merely been a grocery store and gas station, but now encompassed several square blocks of shops.

I recognized the old highway when we crossed it, and was delighted to see that my favorite ‘landmark’ buildings were still standing, not yet having fallen victim to the bulldozer. They were remarkable for their style and their substance—solid, crafted in the old ways, reminders of a different, more gracious life, and a workmanship utterly different from contemporary construction. The old timers still call these stately houses by their family names, for they had been the estates of the richest families in that part of Palestine. But now they were Israeli property, having been ‘captured’ in the war or lost later in other ways. Although their facades and details said ‘Arab,’ there were mezuzah on the doors.

I knew this area, had passed through here many hundreds of times, but for all that was familiar, there was something very different. It took several trips to realize what that
was: an entire mountain was gone. Jebel Abu Ghanem, the last forested hill in that southern area, once declared off-limits to development as a 'green zone,' had become a twin of Gilo, its soft green color replaced by stark concrete and stone apartment towers. The line between development and exploitation is thin. What will become of Eretz Israel, the Holy Land, when the sheep are gone from the fields, and there are no longer gazelle in the hills?
CHAPTER 13

DIFFERENT PATHS

On one of our frequent walks around the hills of Bethlehem, we met a small troop of youngsters. The oldest was a girl of perhaps twelve or thirteen, at the awkward edge between the nimbleness of childhood and the grace of older years. She carried a bundle of sticks on her head, partially wrapped around with a piece of cloth. Beneath the bundle, her scarf was askew and coming loose. She wore jeans, covered by a dress, covered by a sweater that was much too large for her slender frame. She was accompanied by five other children, stair-stepping down in age to the youngest, who looked to be about four years old. They were dark haired, dark skinned and ragged, but they walked along confident and boisterous in their camaraderie. They were talking about ‘foreigners’ as they came within earshot, and then fell silent as we approached each other on the path.

“Salaam aleikum,” I greeted them.

“Wa aleikum a’ salaam,” the girl replied, while her siblings stopped behind her, suddenly quiet and embarrassed.

“Heaven grant you strength,” I added, for the benefit of the twenty or thirty pounds of wood balanced on her head.

“And to you,” she replied, stepping sideways and allowing the bundle of wood to drop to the ground. “Are you from Bethlehem?”

“I live there, but I’m not from there. I’m American.”
‘Where are you from’ is the first question Arabs seem to ask each other, either as part of the ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy or as though knowing someone’s origin might offer insight into what type of person they are and what to expect from them. Of course, the next question is always about family. Family status is another benchmark.

“Are you married to an Arab?” The obvious assumption about me was always marriage, since what else would bring a woman so far from her home country?

“No, he’s American. He’s working on a building in Bethlehem, the new hospital.”

“Oh.” She thought about it for a bit, and apparently decided I was safe to talk to. If he was working in Bethlehem, and we were living there, then we must not be Israelis.

“I’m Rifka.” She proffered a cold, dirty hand, and we shook. “These are my siblings. This is Handa,” she said, indicating the next oldest girl, to whom the toddler was clinging so closely it looked as if she had grown out of the girl’s side, like a branch on a tree. “And Majdi, and Majed, and Hawla, and this one,” she said, pinching the little one’s cheek and triggering a squawk of protest, “is Sireen.” I greeted them all solemnly and introduced myself and my children.

“What an amazing thing!” piped Hawla in a cracked voice, “where did you learn Arabic?” Her brothers shushed her and shoved her behind them.

“From people,” I answered, and switched the topic. “Are you gathering wood for a fire?” I asked, imagining a warm little campfire.

“Yes, for the oven. My mother needs some for tomorrow’s bread.”

“Where are you from?” I asked. “Do you live nearby?”

“No. We’re from al-mochayim.”
“Al mochayim.” I puzzled the word for a minute. It was related to a tent, a word I knew all too well, and it was a place. “Where’s that?” I probed a little more, hoping for some insight.

“Deheisha.” Ahh, that was familiar. Deheisha was a refugee camp. These youngsters were refugees. I really had no idea what that meant, but at least I’d heard of it.

“And you are looking for wood.” It was a couple of miles between here and there.

“We were, but now we have enough, and we’re going home. I just keep dropping it.”

“She does, by heaven!” broke in Hawla. “She’s dropped it twenty times!” One of the boys reached out to quell her, but she eluded him. “It takes too long to gather it up again. We have to get home before dark. We’re going to get clobbered. Aie! Quit pinching me!”

“You need a rope to tie it together,” I said to Rifka, “or else have everyone carry some.”

“Handa’s the only one big enough, and she’s got the baby. Those,” she flicked her head at the boys who were now chasing Hawla, “are too little and silly. I don’t have any rope, so we’re using Handa’s scarf. It’s too small, though.”

“If you want to walk back with us, I have some rope you can have. It’s not far, and almost on the way.” She seemed caught between curiosity, caution and something else, and I thought she would refuse. That wasn’t Rifka’s style though. She nodded, gathered up the wood, and we turned up the path toward the top of the hill. Handa continued to remonstrate with her, speaking in a whisper, but I heard fragments like ‘he’s going to beat us all’ and ‘you’re crazy.’
“Will you get in trouble for this?” I asked.

Rifka and Handa answered simultaneously, one “no” and one “yes.”

“We’ll hurry then,” I said, picking up the pace, “and I’ll just hand you the rope and you can tie it up and go quickly.” And so we did. I grabbed the spare piece of clothesline coiled outside the kitchen door, used it to help tie the bundle together, and hurried them along, grateful that I didn’t have to go through the elaborate social ballet of tea and hospitality.

The next afternoon, there was a tap on the door. It was Handa, accompanied by her two brothers.

“My sister sends you this, with her thanks,” she said, handing me the hank of rope.

“Thank you, but you didn’t need to bring it back.”

“We had to. We have to go now.” She began moving toward the street, herding the boys in front of her.

“Okay, then, thank you. Please send my greetings to Rifka, and to your mother, may heaven be gracious to her.” They left, and I thought nothing more of it, until a few days later, when Rifka herself knocked on the door.

Surprised, I greeted her, exchanging the usual pleasantries. She was carrying a brightly colored woven mat, and handed it to me.

“I made this. It’s for you.” She looked simultaneously proud and embarrassed.

Caught up in the many formulas of thanks to be remembered and expressed, it was a moment before I thought to invite her into the house. Again I saw the war between desire and reluctance, and again curiosity won out. She stepped in, and I ushered her to
the sitting room, which finally had a few chairs and a coffee table. To smooth over the awkwardness she began playing with Omar, making a game of pretending to search for him as he hid behind a chair. I brought out tea, still acceptably warm, although not hot, poured us each a glass, and set out a few plain cookies. Although Rifka politely protested, she seemed pleased. It was probably rare that someone served her tea, since she was the older sister, and would be the one called on to do the fetching and serving.

The remnants of a black eye and a bruise across her cheek suggested she had recently met with some mishap. I tried making polite conversation, asking after her family, but it wasn’t long before I asked what happened to her eye.

“My brother. He gave me good beating the other day, for being late.” She lifted up her sleeve, revealing more bruises and scratches. “They’re all over.”

“How can he hit you like that? Doesn’t your father stop him?”

“No, by heaven, it saves my father from having to do it, and he’s old.”

“I hope it wasn’t my fault!”

“No, how could it be? I’m always in trouble, one thing or another. This time he beat me so hard I was sick in bed the next day. My mother cursed him for it, but he didn’t care. She said I could bring the mat to you, though, so this time I won’t be in trouble.”

I had to pause to think about what she was saying. I knew girls here were tightly controlled, but this seemed extreme. I steered the conversation away from the subject, knowing that it was probably no easier for her to discuss than for me to hear, and soon she was explaining the technique and material used in the mat she had made. In the end she had said she would be back to show me how to make them, and had invited me to meet her mother. She returned a few days later with a bag of colored plastic lacing,
similar to, but a little coarser than that used to make lanyards, and the cord used for the bulk of the mats. She demonstrated her lacing technique, and when she left she reiterated the invitation to visit.

We set out one afternoon, my children and I, to fulfill the obligation, stopping on our way at the small shop down the street to purchase a box of chocolates—one doesn’t go visiting empty handed, except to family or very close friends. I was careful to make sure the candy was Arab produced, rather than Israeli, since offering Israeli goods as a gift was in bad taste. The other end of my street ran into the wedge where the highway to Al Halil and the main road into Bethlehem intersected. It was a short block from there to the border of the camp, but finding the house Rifka had described wasn’t easy.

Streets in the city were quirky, never running in a straight line or going where you would expect them too, but the byways of Dheisheh refugee camp made Bethlehem look like a master planned community. The buildings appeared to have sprung up as haphazardly as the original tents might have done, and it was difficult for me to judge what was a public byway and what was ‘private,’ although the concept of privacy under such close conditions was laughable. Due to its extreme poverty and inadequate services, Dheisheh was a constantly oozing source of disquiet. Boys from the camp were notorious for their stone throwing, and the number of incidences were undoubtedly what had led to the Israelis building adjacent the complex for the military governor and army.

As we wandered a bit, trying to match Rifka’s directions with the actuality, Hawla spotted us and guided us to the house, talking excitedly the entire time. We entered the family complex—three small, separate block rooms connected by an outdoor kitchen. The concrete and block walls were unpainted, but up to about waist high had a stripe of
grey-brown muck that looked like it originated with small children. The concrete 
walkway leading into and through the kitchen/entryway was glossed to a high shine by 
heavy traffic, and laundry hung on a wire, a puddle of soapy water beneath slowly 
soaking into the hard packed dirt. Rifka lived with her mother and younger siblings in 
one room, her father’s other wife and children lived in another, and her father and the two 
older sons lived in the third. I had learned that Sireen, the toddler I’d met with her that 
evening near the wadi, was the next-to-youngest daughter of the woman Rifka referred to 
as ‘my father’s wife.’

We were ushered in to Rifka’s home, and a couple of stools brought to sit on. 
Hawla went to find her sister, and I was left to try and make conversation with their 
mother, who introduced me to available family members in a blur of faces and names. I 
was uncertain who was who or how they were related, or even how to address my 
hostess. She was a heavy woman, with an apologetic and browbeaten way of holding 
herself. Her voice was rough, as though she’d spent a lot of time shouting, but her words 
were cordial. I thought, as I listened, that Hawla sounded like her mother, although I 
found out later Hawla’s vocal qualities were the result of an ‘accident’ with a belt buckle.

Handa appeared with a pot of tea, and Rifka’s mother insisted on serving me, 
although she had difficulty getting around—her knees and back were constantly in pain, 
she said apologetically, and they made her slow and clumsy. She offered some tea to my 
daughter, but Sufa clung shyly to me and refused. Then Rifka burst through the door, 
eyes alight. I stood to greet her and exchanged the ceremonial kiss on each cheek. She 
had been working, mopping the floor of her brother’s shop a few blocks over, and her 
pant legs were still rolled a few inches above the ankle—an oversight which earned her
the lash of her mother’s tongue, for going about like a young hoyden, and a smack for replying saucily. She then sent Rifka next door to fetch a biscuit or two, “for the love of Heaven, my dear, go and ask it of her, so that I don’t have to.”

While Rifka was gone, her mother turned to me and explained, “I must be very strict with her, for her own good. It is dangerous for girls, and she is headstrong, by God, she never listens. I worry that she will get a bad name, and that bad things will happen to her.” I murmured understanding, while holding private my reservations. I doubted that the harsh punishments were having the desired effect. Rifka returned with both the cookies and little Sireen, and conversation then revolved around the small children. We finished the tea, and when I thanked her mother and stood to say goodbye, Rifka asked if she might walk me home.

“Only as far as the edge of the camp. Don’t cross the road, and get back and finish in the store, before we all feel your brother’s wrath,” her mother instructed. She sent me on my way with kind words, and an invitation to visit anytime, to which I offered her the same. Rifka and I talked as we walked, and I asked about her mother’s health.

“By Heaven, it’s not good. She’s had a hard life, too many children. She has trouble with her heart, and there is always trouble with my father’s wife. Then there is trouble with my brother. And there is always trouble in the camp. Everywhere you look is nothing but trouble. My poor mother, she feels it all, and it comes out in her body.” She sounded older than her years, with a world of trouble weighing on her shoulders. We reached the street and I turned to tell her goodbye.

“La, by Heaven, I’m walking you all the way home.”
“No, your mother said to stop here. Here you stop. I’m not adding to your mother’s trouble. Go finish your work, and come visit when you have some free time. I need to go home anyway, and do some sewing. I have a job that has to be finished soon.”

After one more protest, she agreed to return, and we parted. I watched her walk back into the camp, and understood in part why her family was so hard on her. She would not be able to claim the safety of childhood much longer.

Over the next few years, Rifka became a friend. She would suddenly appear on the doorstep, once with her mother, sometimes with her siblings, but more often alone. I worried when she came alone, for generally that meant she had snuck away without permission, but it seemed almost like she needed this small rebellion, or to know that she had someplace to go to escape her family for an hour. I was happy to give her respite, and to fuss over her like a favorite sister. And then for a while I saw little of her, and when I did she was quiet and subdued.

“I am engaged.”

“By Heaven! Congratulations. Where is he from?”

“From Beit Jala. He’s a driver.”

“Congratulations, may Heaven bless you both. What does he drive?”

“Freight trucks. He loads and unloads them, too. He’s so tall, like a mountain, and strong.”

“I hope he is kind.”

“I think so. I cried and cried. Really, what do I want with marriage and children? My father wanted it done, though. The wedding is in two months. I just came to tell you, and to invite you. Please say you’ll come.”
"In sha’Allah. I am honored.” We talked for a few minutes, but she was obviously under constraints to hurry back. I walked her to the corner and embraced her. She had been a child too old for her years, and now she was going to be a wife too young.

Woman About Town, 2002

Maha had come to Jerusalem with a number of objectives. First had been to take the baby to see Mamasan, but she also wanted to visit the well-baby clinic for inoculations, and to go shopping in the Old City. Since I was available, she asked me to accompany her on these excursions. I watched as she prepared to go out, and it was eye-opening. While she had arrived in a standard white scarf, she now put on a black, snood-like head covering that looked very much like something an orthodox Jewish woman would wear. Her clothes were modest, but quite contemporary, and like the snood, seemed un-Arab. Most surprising of all was the fact that she had a driver’s license, an accomplishment from the time before she was married, and would be borrowing her family’s car to run her errands. I had a graphic image of how much had changed when Maha came out the door with the car keys and cell phone in one hand, baby carrier/car seat in the other, a diaper bag slung over her shoulder. Car seats, women drivers, and cell phones had all been unknown just the generation before.

We arrived at the well-baby clinic in the nearby Israeli neighborhood, the same one to which I had taken my children all those years ago. While one can question many of the less pleasant aspects of Israeli society, their development of a preventative health care system inclusive of all children is among their most laudable accomplishments. The clinic was quite run down, but not as busy as I remembered it. Maha approached the
counter confidently, speaking a clear, un-accented Hebrew, and presented her paperwork. She and the baby were taken to a room, but were soon back out. The nurse did not want to inoculate the baby for another week; she was too young, and too tiny. She empathized with Maha’s difficulty traveling, but said the baby needed another eight days and some weight gain to be ready for the shot.

“Well, it gives you another reason to come back again, and visit Mamasan,” I suggested.

“My husband doesn’t like it when I’m gone. It’s always an argument when I come here.”

“What, he can’t fend for himself for a day or two so you can see your family?”

“Oh, he can. He just doesn’t like to. And it makes trouble with my in-laws, like I’m not being a good mother, or I’m abandoning my husband. This time I left my son with my mother-in-law, hoping it would keep her busy enough she’d stop trying to make trouble.” She looked a little embarrassed, and changed the subject. We talked off and on about the land, the things that had changed, the mountain and her family.

“Ilham will have a difficult time of it with her new baby. My mother practically raised her other children, taking care of them each day while Ilham was at work. That’s why the little one is so lost. His grandmother was his world, and now he’s got no one.”

“Maybe this round of radiation will help,” I offered lamely.

“Insha’Allah.” She didn’t sound hopeful.

We went to the city to run her errands—not in the Old City itself, but to the stores of East Jerusalem. The area is fully Arab, some Christian, some Muslim, but unlike the market in the city the area caters to a wealthier clientele, or at least a more demanding
one. Stores are clean and organized like their Western counterparts, though in smaller spaces, with glassed in displays featuring the latest fashions, racks and hangers and dressing rooms, and ‘sale’ signs in the windows. We drove a few blocks, looking for a place to park, but the streets were lined with cars, trucks and garbage bins. However, some enterprising family had turned an empty lot into a valet car park, and Maha simply pulled up, got out and handed the attendant her keys. Once again I was struck by the contrast, for coming down the street toward us was a hand cart, loaded to shoulder height, an artifact of earlier, less technological times, and this very contemporary young woman was having her car parked. I wondered also what Mamasan would have thought about the outlay of money just so one didn’t have to walk a few extra blocks.

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Harder Times

As the years passed in Bethlehem, and my daughter became of an age to go to school, I was faced with the decision of whether and where to send her. There were two school systems: the UNWRA schools in the refugee camps, and the parochial schools. Since Sufa had become friends with the young girl, Zein, across the street, and Zein was going to attend the Sisters of St. Joseph, that was the preferred choice. I felt that at least there would be someone to stick up for my daughter if needed, since she would probably be the only ajnabeeya attending. She would also be able to take the small bus, and not have to walk. The school was near the center of Bethlehem itself, and the teachers were mostly Sisters of the order. Instruction was in Arabic, and the curriculum was demanding, for even the first grade was taught both English and French. The girls wore uniforms, and
I exploited the fact to my benefit, sewing and selling uniforms for considerably less than the shops in town. It helped subsidize and otherwise unaffordable expense.

While my life in the new house was easier in many ways, it had its challenges as well. Israel controlled the basic infrastructure and resources of the country—roads, power and water—and it used them to help manage the population. If a town or area was too active, they would find themselves cut off—no water, no power, and no exit. I had not experienced this type of control on the mountain in Jerusalem, since it was hooked up to the city system and linked to the same grid as the Israeli citizens. But Bethlehem was an Arab municipality, and as such, it was subject to having the water or power ‘interrupted’ at any time. I learned to store and manage water very carefully, because it could be as long as five days before it would flow through the pipes again, and then it might come on for only a few hours.

Work had become difficult for David to find, and he was traveling wherever necessary to get it. He built decks for rich American Jews, pergolas for Israeli restaurants, and even went as far as Tel Aviv or Al Halil to tile roofs. He was often gone for a week at a time, and the deteriorating political situation made those stretches of time even longer. The intifada was beginning, and it was hazardous to travel the roads regardless of who you were. I felt the anxiety keenly. Shops would close, traffic would stop, and I would know there was another strike or curfew. On more than one occasion my daughter returned from school early, the school having been closed in response to some threat or another. I felt I’d had enough when she came in one afternoon, her eyes red and voice hoarse. The street outside the school had been the site of a clash between the army and a group of youths, and tear gas, no respecter of innocence, had gotten into the school. I was
upset, but it was better than the nearest UNWRA school, which had been directly hit, and had been closed more often than open. Between financial difficulties and the escalating violence around us, it was harder and harder to find reasons to stay. After a final fiasco that had David fleeing the country just one step ahead of the tax man and immigration, I sold what I could of the household goods and got tickets back to Vegas.
I agreed to go with Maha when she returned to Bethlehem, despite some misgivings. When she had arrived at her parent’s house she was still upset from the search and questioning she’d undergone at the border, saying how difficult it was with the baby. Yet she seemed insistent that I should go back to Bethlehem. I wanted nothing more to do with security forces. If there was a likelihood of questions or too close scrutiny, I preferred to avoid it.

"Don’t worry," she said, "we won’t go through the checkpoint.”

Musab drove us out of Jerusalem, turning down smaller and smaller roads. In the end, we were at the end of a long line of slow moving cars, bumping down a dirt track. The track widened, and in a small area between houses, there was an impromptu parking lot roiling with people, the air thick with dust and exhaust. It was dark, and cars would flick their lights off as soon as they neared. We stepped out into the night, into the pandemonium of voices calling, greetings and leavings, negotiations for rides, exclamations, curses and blessings. Small clumps of people were going and coming across an empty section of land, parcels and children bundled willy-nilly as they scooted from one country to another, flowing like water around man made obstacles and artificial borders. We said goodbye to Musab and joined the stream.
Maha’s husband, Fouad, was waiting on the other side, and she called his cell phone to get his exact location. We proceeded uneventfully to where he was parked, Maha carrying the baby and holding her son’s hand, while I juggled her bags—she’d gone to the souk to pick up things no longer available in Bethlehem. We greeted each other briefly and had loaded and departed within a short minute. This crossing could be raided and shut down at anytime, so it was imperative to move away quickly.

We drove a few hundred yards in the dark, lurching up and down on a pitted dirt track, then pulled out onto a small paved road and turned the lights on. It was still difficult to see. I reached up to rub a corner of the window. It was Plexiglas, so badly scratched and aged that it was nearly impossible to see out of. Fouad saw me touch the window and laughed.

“It’s pretty bad, isn’t it? It’s old. I bought it from an Israeli who lived in a settlement near Al Halil. He had to drive in to Jerusalem every day for work, back when the highway went by the refugee camp, so he replaced all the glass with plastic, because of the youngsters throwing rocks.” We pulled out of a small street onto a larger one, and I recognized it as part of the highway.

“This is the road to Al Halil, isn’t it?”

“It used to be. The checkpoint is down there,” he gestured ahead, “about three kilometers. Was it there when you lived in Bethlehem?”

“Not like now. It used to be there only sometimes.”

“Ahh. It’s changed a lot since then. Everything has changed. We’ll drive into town, and you can see.” We followed the highway to the junction and turned up toward the heart of the city, still without seeing another car.
Suddenly, as though a switch had been thrown, the town was alive. Shops were open, despite the late hour, and pedestrians filled the sidewalks. Traffic was heavy and wildly erratic, and it appeared that traffic control, road courtesies, and safety were forgotten. There were no signal lights in the town, despite the busy streets, and stop signs seemed to mean it was time to play ‘chicken,’ just to see who had more nerve.

“Ah, by Heaven, if you could have seen it last year! When the Authority was first here, and the Arab countries sent money to help build the place for the government, everything was new and beautiful. They fixed the streets, redid the Plaza, cleaned the whole town up. It was beautiful!”

It was true. Despite the rubble and destruction, much of what I saw was new. It was an odd comparison—the old Bethlehem of my memory, quiet and civilized, with ancient buildings that had been gradually crumbling under the burden of years, versus this frantic new town, with the sharp angles and materials of obviously recent construction, now degraded and shattered by conflict.

“What happened? I mean, I read about the siege on the church, and I know there were troubles…”

“War. It was just war. You didn’t know which way the gunfire or shells were going to come from. I think the Israelis wanted to destroy things, anything, everything. And the Arabs—they were crazy. Look! Alaa’s new store is open. Let’s stop by.” This last he addressed to Maha as he jerked the car abruptly toward the sidewalk.

It was a mercy to get out and walk, for in addition to not being able to see out through the windows, I was feeling lightheaded from the fumes; exhaust was leaking into the interior of the car. We went in to the shop. It was bright and clean, and filled to the
brim with glass trinkets, all imported stuff from China or Indonesia. Fouad called to the proprietor and began a conversation, congratulating him on his new shop. I took the baby from Maha, in part so that her hands would be free, but also so that I would be less noticeable. It was the first day open, and the shop was full of people passing back and forth in the aisles. It was doing an amazing amount of business.

"Don't you want to buy gifts to take back?" Maha asked me.

"It's too hard to carry glass," I told her. I had to keep from shaking my head.

Glass doodads from China. A whole shop full. What possible need could there be for such stuff in a country with no security, no economy, and no infrastructure? It was incomprehensible. Once back in the car, listening to Maha and Fouad talk about the items they had purchased, I understood better. Most of the people in the shop had been there not because they wanted or needed glassware, but to help a new business get off the ground. By ensuring its success, they were doing what they could to build their community. I still have the glass pen holder Maha bought and gave to me. It sits on my desk, below the picture I took of Ilham's son playing in the garden.

When we finally got back to Maha's house it was late. She hurried about, making tea and putting together a quick supper, and I tried to stay out of the way—a challenge in her small kitchen. She lived in a two bedroom dwelling above her in-law's house. I was shocked by how similar it was to the cold and soul-less apartments on the Israeli side—square and hard and completely utilitarian—but perhaps that was inevitable: after building Israeli houses in the Israeli style for so many years, it was only natural that it would become the normal vernacular of Arab builders and engineers.
We sat for a while in after dinner in the living room, while Fouad smoked a cigarette and held forth on the conditions of Palestinian, not just here, but across the Arab world. Maha got out the photo album of her wedding, and narrated the highlights for me. It was a large affair, held in Bethlehem in the ballroom of a small hotel. Fouad allowed us to finish, then he told Maha it was time to get the children in bed. I helped her bathe them, and walked the little one about on my shoulder. She was apparently feeling the effects of her shot, and was uncomfortable and fussy. I noticed that here in this house, Maha kept quiet. The normally outspoken girl and strong young woman of my acquaintance was subdued in her own home.

The next morning, after Fouad left for work, Maha fed and dressed her young son and did the morning chores. We opened the door on the kitchen balcony, and I walked back and forth with the baby, keeping her entertained and comforted. Across the street and up a few houses was an empty lot. Along its edge were three huge pine trees, a rarity in such a densely populated neighborhood.

"Beautiful trees," I said, pointing at them.

"There used to be a beautiful house, too, but they blew it up," she replied.

"The Israelis?"

"Who else?"

"Why?"

"Did you hear, perhaps eight or nine months ago, of a suicide bomber in Tel Aviv?"

"Probably. There have been so many."
“Ya haram, Heaven forbid, there are too many dying all across the land. But one of them was the youngest son of Abu Musa, our neighbor who lived there.” She pointed at the empty lot. “He was not a good father, far too harsh on his son, but he didn’t deserve to lose everything like he did. The story goes that the boy got mixed up with some Russian in Tel Aviv, and next thing you know, boom! A week later the army showed up at one o’clock in the morning, and went house to house, waking the whole neighborhood.” She paced back and forth, gesturing out the window at the surrounding buildings.

“They searched each house on the block, even though they knew exactly who it was and where he lived. Then they blew up Dar Abu Musa, a big, beautiful house in the old style. Such a loss! The mother died a few weeks afterward, from a heart attack, although people say it was a broken heart. The family had been here for generations, but now they’re gone, moved in with some relatives from Beit Sahur. Look,” she says, bringing a piece of stone out of the living room. “This is what broke the big window in there. It came through the glass, and landed on the couch. Luckily we were downstairs at the time. It was winter though, and it took almost two weeks to get it replaced.”

She flicked the dish towel and laid it out to dry. “Anyway, what time shall we leave for town?”

Maha had decided I needed to go sight seeing in Bethlehem, and would take none of my protests to the contrary. Rather than walking, she called a taxi, and it pulled up in front of the house a few minutes later. I could see why Abu Mazin had approved of this marriage, although I found it hard accept the idea that Maha had become a member of the Bethlehem upper—well, mid-upper—crust. Fouad came from a good Muslim family,
well established and respected. He had gone to school in an Eastern bloc country to become a dentist, and returned home to open a practice. He obviously was very proud of his children and his young wife, and the fact that he had come back to practice here, where life was so difficult, said something positive about his values. Yet the way he spoke to his wife and son, and the very fact that Maha was cautious around him, made me uncomfortable.

We took the taxi to the center of town, in the commercial district above the market. Fouad had an office there, in a building that seemed to be undergoing extensive remodeling, and we stopped by briefly to say hello, and to let him know where we would be. It was a fairly large office, certainly luxurious by local standards, although the furnishings were quite worn.

“You have your phone?” he asked her.

“Here,” she patted her bag.

“I’ll pick you up when I go to lunch. I’ll call to let you know when.” He showed us to the door, and went back work.

As we walked out, I gestured to the scaffolding along one wall, and the plastic that covered a window hole.

“They’re fixing it,” she said, answering my inquiring look. “A shell went through the wall last winter, and they decided to go ahead and put a window there.”

We continued down into the souk, walking down the stone pitted road that led in to the heart of the town. Bethlehem was physically much as I remembered it, but there had been other changes. The biggest one, it seemed to me, watching the people in the streets and shops, was that they walked more proudly here than in Jerusalem, with an air
of belonging or ownership, or perhaps just less fear. Rows of dresses from ropes outside the doors of dress shops, and the colorful fabrics fluttered in the breeze. Kitchenware, dry goods, clothing and accessories shops all stood side by side, door by door, and battled for the attention of customers with displays and banners. “Price drop!” “Sale.” “New.” “Just arrived!” Custom was slow, nonetheless. It seemed somehow less Western, and perhaps less busy. There were no longer Israeli manufactured goods in the shops—before they had been nearly unavoidable—and almost everything was imported, although there were some few goods made locally. The economic divorce was as clear as the writing on the wall—and there was a lot of that. Graffiti was omnipresent, long slanting runs of Arabic letters, rage made static in vivid reds and blacks. The chaos I had seen in the streets was made concrete and visible here, splashed onto the stone and bleeding into drips and smears of slogans, warnings and nonsense.

Maha and I walked all the way through the market, and came out in the plaza. We entered the tourist shops on the edge, where figurines and gifts commemorating the city of Christ’s birth were, like the dresses and kitchenware in the market above, “On Sale!” One shop, whose proprietors I had once known, specialized in olivewood, and I went in, hoping to see someone I recognized. I didn’t, but stayed a moment to look at the wares. Olive is a rich, wonderful wood with colorful grain, dense texture and heavy weight that make even the most senseless knick-knack a thing of beauty. While I admired the goods, I was not inclined to purchase anything, and after the salesman determined I was not a serious shopper, the atmosphere cooled considerably. We exited, and I wished him health and strength, just to see his eyes widen in surprise.
The Church of the Nativity was still standing, looking, if possible, even more aged and bedraggled. Like Mamasan so many years before, Maha had intentionally brought me here; however, her purpose was to show me the scars and wounds in the old building. Bethlehem had always been moderate, and had seldom felt the boot of occupation as heavily as other towns, but just six months before it had been the site of a month long standoff between the Israelis and Palestinian militants. All of Bethlehem and the nearby villages had felt the violence, although the incident had ended 'peacefully,' thanks to international intervention.

We paused outside the entrance, and Maha told me excerpts from the drama, pointing around the plaza, saying, “The soldiers took over that building, and that one. They wanted anything tall, so they could see in and shoot. They parked the tanks over there, and no traffic came in or out.” We went through the low doorway, into the courtyard.

“The fighters tried to stay out of sight. They hid here, and over there,” she pointed, “but wherever the snipers could see, they shot. This is the place where a man lay after he was shot. They scrubbed the blood away, and the dirt, but the fighters were trapped in here for a month.”

“Here, feel this.” She ran her hand across one of the stone pillars. “These are from bullets. These stones have stood a thousand years, and they went and shot holes into them. But it could have been worse. It could have been like Ramallah, or Jenin. This place is only still standing because America and Europe would not allow Israel to destroy it.”
Although I know that outside pressure normally has little influence on Israel’s short term actions, in this case I could see the thinking. If it had been any other Palestinian city, or any other building, there would have been no standoff, no pulling of punches: the place would have been leveled. However, I believed it was spared due to the iconic nature of the place, rather than any direct threat or demands on the part of western governments. Some cans of worms even a fool will leave untouched.

Maha walked me through all the parts of the church, talking about the curfews, the closures, the searches, how difficult things had been around town, and how the men involved had been deported and arrested and their families punished. We went below ground to the crèche itself. There were few visitors today, and the candles were nearly burned out. Maha gestured to the white stone altar with the golden star.

“Here is where our Grandmother Mary gave birth to the Prophet Issa.” My brain slowly processed what she was telling me. Our Grandmother Mary. Of course she meant it not in fact, but as a title of respect. But in all probability my young Muslim friend was quite likely distantly related—oh, so very distantly, but still—to Mary of the Bible, or some other Old Testament figure. The Palestinians had lived here since before Islam, before Christianity, and perhaps even before the Jews, since the Jews had had to fight for their land, and overcome the inhabitants, those dratted Philistines, to stake their claim. Same old war, still going on.

Maha’s phone rang, and we went back outside to meet Fouad for lunch. He picked us up at the edge of the plaza and we circled back through town to a busy little restaurant on Star Street. The tables were small, covered with red and white checked table cloths, with unlit candles. I looked at the young men in white shirts, talking on cell phones and
working through lunch, eating at a restaurant that, except for the language on the menu, looked as though it could have been Anyville, USA, and the irony of it all made me shake my head. Right down the street, through those large metal doors, the UN had once doled out flour and other rations to the refugees. That building across the way with gaping holes—shelled in last year’s activities, probably, and now closed—was once a busy sweatshop, where women from the camp had sewn cheap clothes at ridiculously low wages. Some things had changed for the better, or at least appeared that way.

In the early afternoon, after her husband had dropped us back at her house, I told Maha I was ready to go back to Jerusalem. There had been more incidents in the north, I was afraid that if anything major happened, I would be trapped. Although she urged me to wait for Fouad to return from work, so that he could drive me to the border, I declined. I was reluctant to wait, even anxious, and I didn’t necessarily want to be seen getting out of an Arab car. Maha gave up arguing, and walked me down to the street. I looked again at the empty lot across the way, then bent over and picked up a broken chip of Jerusalem stone, smaller but similar to the piece she had shown me that morning. I tucked it in my pack.

“A rock? Always crazy! No gifts, nothing pretty, but you want to take home a rock, a piece of Abu Musa’s blown up house. Walking off like a gypsy.” She looked very much the disapproving young matron, standing at her garden gate. Then she smiled.

“Maybe a pilgrim.” I grinned and shrugged, throwing the strap over one shoulder. I gave her my formal thanks for her kindness and hospitality, extending it out to her husband and his family, using all the proper formulas and extravagant praises, until she shushed me and told me to get going. I hugged her good bye, kissed the baby, and set off.
Knowing I would probably never see either of them again kept my eyes moist until I had walked several blocks.

I knew that it wasn’t far between Maha’s house and the check point—a mile and a half or two at most. I had walked it many times before, when I had visited Rifka, first at the camp, and then later, after she married, not far from this neighborhood. There was no one outside, so one walking on the street, but I could smell cooking in the air, and laundry waved from the rooftops. I followed the twisting streets, each one successively larger, until I came out onto the main road. I had lived five years within earshot of that highway, had known the patterns each day brought: Friday’s shared taxis loaded with men going in to Jerusalem for prayers at Al Aqsa; Saturday’s cars full of secular Israelis come out to the Arab side for shopping—certainly the busiest day; Monday’s heavy trucks, filled with stones from the quarries. All that was gone now; the businesses that had lined the highway were closed and empty, having died off with the closing of the road. There was cross traffic, although not much, as residents passed between Beit Jala on the west and Bethlehem on its east side. There were still a few stores, on the end farthest from the checkpoint, but nothing nearer.

Several blocks on the east side of the road were empty, the area surrounded by a few strands of barbed wired, piles of stone and rubble indicating that there had once been something there. I searched my memory. Between the turn off to Beit Jala and the road into the city there had been... good heavens. That pile of rock and concrete was all that remained of the Israeli garrison and prison, and next to it had been part of the refugee camp. It had been a war zone, and the destruction was complete. That spot there, where the fence zigged—that was where Rifka’s family had lived. Nothing remained. I
wondered then, exactly what I was doing, sashaying through like I had some kind of business being there. I quickened my step, white dust puffing up with every step.

Rather than following the highway past the compound that encircled Rachel’s Tomb, I turned east a few blocks, and walked up my old street. There were more houses, stacked crazily, it seemed, and the stone overlaying the surface of the concrete was shoddily done. I paused for a moment in front of Zein’s house, but caution and my sense of urgency got the better of me. There was no way to know if the same family still lived there, or who was watching. The afternoon was growing deeper shadows, and I wanted to be back on the mountain before evening, so I turned down toward the highway, taking off my scarf before I got to the corner. I rehearsed my answers as to where I had been, and practiced looking touristy, thinking that I should have bought some olivewood knick-knacks.

Automobile traffic was stopped, backed up for a block or two, but I continued toward the checkpoint. I walked toward the closest soldiers, and they gestured, stopping me some distance away. They spoke sharply, and pointed to the right. I went right, coming up against a barricade, and backtracked along it perhaps thirty feet. It was the division for foot traffic, of which there apparently wasn’t much. I followed the barricade to a small building, and presented my passport to the soldiers. The young man who took it read it carefully, checking the visa stamp and thumbing through the pages. I cringed, wondering if I would have gotten a stamp coming in to Bethlehem through here.

“You are tourist?”

“Yes.”

“From America?”
“Yes.”

“Where?”

“America.”

“No, where in America?”

“Oh. Las Vegas.”

“Ahh, Las Vegas.” He said something to his comrade, and added to me, “I was there once. It was hot.”

“Yeah, it gets warm there.” I really didn’t know what to say.

“You have been to BeytLaHem?”

“Yes, to the church.”

He nodded and handed me my passport. “Have a nice visit. You should be careful walking.”

“Thanks.”

Back on the road, walking, I breathed again. I remembered a time when the checkpoints were temporary, a mere nuisance, and the border invisible, more of a state of mind, but this crossing brings home to me how much is different. With the establishment of a political state, the anonymity of the Palestinians and the ability to travel across the physical spaces of a shared land were gone. Families suddenly find themselves sundered, divided by documents and razor wire, and the territory, unconnected to the rest of the land, struggles to fight atrophy, to somehow grow and prosper in a political and physical limbo. The cost of a national identity has been high.

The highway curved and branched, one side turning toward Gilo, the other toward the east, where Jebel Abu Ghanem had been. I think of the walls Israel is building,
cutting up the land, piling up concrete and razor wire, trapping the Palestinians in what
the press is calling 'ghettos.' But it seemed to me, looking at the mutilation of Jebel Abu
Ghanem, and the spreading scab of urbanization, that the Israelis are voluntarily building
themselves into concrete cell blocks, much like prisons or ghettos. Where a wall stands,
something is kept out—but also trapped within. I flag a bus down a little later, and am
safe on the mountain before dark.

Leaving For the Last Time

I spent the day at Dar Abu Mazin, washing my clothes, drying them on the
clothesline in Mamasan’s garden, sitting under the olive tree. I finish packing, and find
that the time has come. The bag is crammed, filled with gifts from my family, and my
heart is filled too. I’ve been fighting tears all afternoon, and as I carry my bag out of the
bedroom into the liwan, they are far too close to the surface. The family, minus Maha,
who remained in Bethlehem, and Mamasan, still in the hospital, has gathered to say
goodbye, and I am both honored and touched. So much they have shared with me and
taught me over the years, and I have nothing to offer in return. There is nothing I can do
to help here, yet I would give anything to be able to.

I hold my tears tightly as each of my brothers and sisters give me the farewell kiss
on each cheek, but when it is time to say goodbye to Abu Mazin, I begin to crack, and the
water leaks from my eyes.

“La, la, la, why you are crying? You mustn’t cry now, or I will begin.” I try to
smile at the joke, and so does he. I break protocol and hug him tightly, and he pats me
gently. “La, my daughter, don’t cry. Insha’Allah we will see you again someday.”
"Yellah, let's go," I say to Mohammed, who is driving, and reach for my bag.

Emad intercepts me, saying "Take these, I'll carry that," and tucks a handful of tissues into my hand instead.

We go out through the veranda, and I see the lights of the city, shining across the dark velvet of the valley. A bright, golden nimbus surrounds the mosque. I blink, pushing the tears away, and it's gone. I pass down the stairs to the waiting car.

AAAA

A Question of Security

As we neared the airport, Mohammed began to instruct me.

"You must say we met at a café in Jerusalem, and you ask me for a ride. You must not say you know me, only that we met today. It will be very difficult going out. You must be careful what you say."

"Okay, what café?"

"On Jaffa Street, near the mall. It doesn't matter which one."

"You could have let me take the bus."

"Don't worry. Just be careful."

We pulled up to the checkpoint, and were immediately signaled to the side, undoubtedly because of the license plates. Mohammed was immediately taken out of sight, and two armed soldiers walked with me to the back of the car. They began with my passport, the reason I was in Israel, and where I had been. I answered each question slowly and carefully. I met the man in Jerusalem, at a café on Jaffa Street. I don't know him, but he seemed nice. I asked him if he would give me a ride to the airport, and he did.
No, I don’t know him, but he seemed nice. Yes, I know it’s dangerous in Israel. No, it isn’t America. Will this take much longer? I have to check in soon for my flight.

The air was cold and damp, and I began shivering. I tried to stop, afraid it would make me look nervous and guilty, but at last had to ask if I could get a sweater from my bag in the car.

The older soldier, who had been mostly silent, answered, “Not yet, I am sorry.” He called to someone, and a moment later three more soldiers walked over with Mohammed. He offered the keys to one of the soldiers, who gestured at him to open the trunk. They had him pull the bag out and set it on the ground a little ways off, and then gave the car a thorough examination.

“Is this your bag?” one of them asked me.

“Yes.”

“Did you place it in the car?”

“Yes.”

“Open it.”

I did, unzipping and pulling the compartments open and started setting my clothes on the side. They glanced in, apparently changed their minds, and told me to close it and put it away. They spoke together, and a moment later Mohammed joined me, and we were motioned into the car.

“Can you tell me where my terminal is?” I asked. “I am afraid I’m going to be late.”

“Follow the other cars.” We did, pulling out and moving away into traffic as smoothly as possible.
I opened my passport. They had placed an orange sticker inside. It could only mean I'd been red flagged. I peeled it off.

"I would walk with you in..." Mohammed started.

"No, it's better not to."

We pulled in to a parking space and unloaded quickly. I found another sticker on the side of my bag, and peeled it off. I gathered the strap of the bag and pulled it over my shoulder, careful not to look at Mohammed.

"I can't thank you enough, but if I stay here, I'm going to start crying again, and that'll be hard to explain. I have to get ready for security." I started to hug him and thought better of it, reached to shake his hand and changed my mind. "Give all my love to Mamasan. I gotta go." I bolted for the terminal, and he stood watching, making sure I got there. I know, because I glanced back, but I dared not wave.

Security inside the terminal was tight. I had gone no more than thirty steps before someone asked for my ticket, and pointed me to the correct area. Lines were long but closely monitored and managed, with agents passing along them every few minutes, checking ID and tickets. Once cleared at the counter, it was time for the luggage to be searched. I watched an Arab family a few lines away, their belongings all out, empty bags checked and rechecked. Then it was my turn.

I knew the tourist line was bad, but it was all I had, so I tried it. A supervisor was called, and then a female agent. My bags were searched, more questions asked.

"Don't you watch the news? We are at war. No one comes any more as a tourist."

I knew that was a lie, for I'd seen tourists—granted, not many, but still too many to warrant this much doubt. I should have come on a Holy Land Junket—then I'd have
tourist credentials. Now they wanted receipts for hotel and bus, which I told them I had torn up. They wanted room numbers, bus numbers, and street names, which I had, in fact, researched. They were quite frankly disbelieving, and so I elaborated, bringing up the time I had lived here in Eilat, and that my daughter was born there. Finally I said that it was a trip to commemorate the end of my marriage, and that my divorce was due to be finalized in a few weeks.

"I don't believe you," the female agent told me, yet again. "I think someone is using you."

"I have told you everything. I can't help it if you don't believe me." I shrugged and shook my head. We went over everything again.

A scant ten minutes before my plane was due to leave, I was taken to a cubicle, physically searched, and cleared. I had been under interrogation for almost two hours.

"You'd better hurry. You could miss your flight." The supervisor handed me back my passport and ticket. "Have a safe trip." I wondered if my bag would make it onto the plane, but didn't have energy to even ask. I moved off as quickly as I could to find my gate, suddenly appalled at the idea I could be trapped here longer.

The hurry to the gate is irrelevant, for they keep the passengers waiting for nearly an hour after I get there. Like slightly desperate cattle, we crowd the doors, beyond patience, dumb with fatigue, boredom, or misery. Finally the announcement is made, and the door opens. We begin descending. An old man slips and falls, cutting himself on the metal stairs. He is scooped up, helped down, walked to the tram that will carry him to the plane that will lift him up, away from the Holy Land. His blood mixes with the black
scum of shoes, and is tread through and smeared until it's no longer visible. It's there, though, the blood underlying everything.

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