

# Stone House



Grandmother Fatima has just arrived at our new apartment on Radio Street, on the northern side of Ramallah in the West Bank. She is carrying her woven bamboo basket filled with green almonds from her village in Jerusalem. She does not say whether she likes or dislikes our new place. When I ask her she says, “All that matters is that we are in the same country and I can visit you.” She then asks me to remind her how old I am, what school I go to now, and what grade I am in. I tell Grandma that I am seven and a half years old, still go to the Jalazone Girls’ School, run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), and will soon complete the second grade. I am about to show her that I can write my name and many other words, but I stop when I remember that she has never gone to school and cannot read or write.

Mother and Grandma go to the kitchen. I follow them

quietly, hoping to listen in on their conversation and learn about the strange world of grownups and its many surprises—marriages, money, deaths, and whispered problems about relationships.

Today Grandma is speaking about Aunt Amina, one of Mother's two sisters. Aunt Amina lives in Amman, Jordan. She has ten daughters and no sons, and her husband, Nimer, insists he wants a boy to carry on his name. Nimer is a professor at a university, and everyone in our family calls him *mitaallem*, educated.

Grandma is worried about Aunt Amina's safety because seven months ago, in the middle of September 1970, thousands of Palestinians living in Jordan were killed when the fedayeen, the Palestinian freedom fighters, and the Jordanian army had one of their worst battles. The hostilities began even before September and haven't ended yet.

The fedayeen wanted to gain more political and military control inside Jordan in order to fight Israel from the Jordanian border so they could take back Palestine from Israel and return to the homes and cities they lost in the war of 1948, which created the Palestinian *Nakba*, catastrophe, and then the Six-Day War which created the Palestinian *Naksa*, setback, of 1967.

The fedayeen hoped that Jordan would help them in their fight against Israel. But the Jordanian leaders did not want the fedayeen to organize non-Jordanian military groups inside their country. So the two sides fought, and the Jordanian army won after a massacre of Palestinians so grim that the month of Ayloul

is now called Ayloul al-Aswad, Black September. Those words make me think of a whole month without the sun rising once.

“Every time I pray, I leave on the prayer rug big questions that I believe only Allah can answer,” Grandma says. “They are about the future and what will happen in this woeful Holy Land. But even after I pray, the questions are still there in my mind and in the world.” She raises her arms to the sky pleading: “*La-aimta ya rab?*” Dear God, until when?

“Nothing in our lives is predictable, but let’s not despair,” Mother says.

Mother and Grandma begin to exchange happier family stories, entangled with names, nicknames, and half events. They finish each other’s sentences, and I try to understand and arrange in my mind the names of my relatives, especially those whom I have not met because they live in other countries, or those who have died but continue to live in these stories as I learn new pieces of how they fit into our family history.

When Grandma gets up to leave, I take her basket and walk with her to the bus stop near the giant radio tower with the frightening skull-shaped high-voltage danger signs that order people to stay away. Radio Street is named after this broadcast tower, which was built by the British forces when they ruled over Palestine after World War I. Perhaps from this day on, every time Grandma Fatima listens to a radio program, she will think of us.

When the bus leaves, carrying Grandma with it, I try to guess how she feels about our new apartment. I hope she

dislikes it, because ever since we moved here, one month ago, I have been trying to convince myself to like it, but in my heart I do not.

Most of me still lives at the stone house we left behind on top of a hill near Nablus Road on the northeastern side of Ramallah. There, I often hid behind big rocks or lay on them, feeling their warm backs against my own. I picked colorful wildflowers and crushed them to use as finger paint on the rocks. I played with turtles on the gravel road, removing obstacles from their paths, sometimes carrying them and running so they would reach their homes faster. I also liked to place bread crumbs on their backs for them to take to their children.

I think about that house every day, but it is no longer made of stone. Now it is made of memories—hours spent watching migrating birds in the sky, waiting for dinner, for Mother to come home after shopping trips, or for Father to come home from driving his truck.

I remember the toys my older brothers created: cars they built from thin, colorful electrical wires; skateboards constructed from wooden vegetable boxes fixed on ball bearings they got from abandoned car tires; kites made with bamboo stalks and newspaper glued together with bread dough; musical instruments shaped from rubber bands strung over a cooking pan; slingshots carved from tree branches; and origami rockets tied to strings and then to Mother's clothesline and left to fly all day.

I can also change my memories as I choose. The garden in front of the house now has magical plants that grow both fruits and vegetables. Rain never falls, except right into designated water containers or within the borders of the front garden. Sometimes a passing purple cloud rains sweet black grapes. We all open our mouths to catch and eat them.

My parents bought the stone house five years ago, when I was two and a half years old, right after the birth of my sister, Mona. And even though only my youngest brother, Samer, was born there, a year ago, and the rest of us children were born in various cities—Basel, who's ten and a half, and I in Jerusalem; Muhammad, who's nine and a half, in Jericho; and Mona, who's five, in al-Bireh—I feel as though all of us were born there.

We left the stone house once before, four years ago, on June 5, 1967, when the Six-Day War started. We had to run from shelter to shelter and from fear to fear as Israeli, Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordanian armies fought. The six days became one hundred and thirty-five days for us because it took that long before we could return to Ramallah with the help of the United Nations and the International Red Cross. At the end of the war, Ramallah was occupied by Israel and we began to live as refugees in our own homes and on our own land, with no right to travel to other countries and be assured that we could come back, no right to cultivate most of the lands we owned, and no right to build new homes or start new businesses without the permission of *al-bakem al-askari*, the Israeli military

ruler. But when we returned and lived in the stone house again, that helped me to remember how I had felt before the war: happy and safe.

Then Israeli soldiers started to come daily to train on our hillside. We could see them outside our window as they set up camps surrounded by barbed wire. They ran drills and practiced shooting at cardboard cutouts shaped like people, leaving those targets with countless bullet holes that bled air.

My siblings and I found many ways to become less afraid of the soldiers, including climbing the barbed wire around their camps after they left for the day, playing hide-and-seek inside the trenches they had dug, gathering empty bullet shells, and peeking through the holes in the cardboard people—it was like looking through binoculars into a smaller world.

But then some soldiers began to knock on the door when Father was at work. They asked for a drink of water, even though they carried water bottles. They looked at Mother as though she was the water they wanted to drink. Each time, Mother pointed from the window to our well, which the soldiers could use to refill their bottles; then we pulled the curtains shut, made certain that our door was locked, and pushed all the furniture we could gather against it. We watched the soldiers from the slits between the curtains.

We could no longer go outside, except after the army left for the evening. So my parents decided to leave the stone house forever. They sold it and searched for a different place for us

to move to. We came here. I wish we hadn't, and that the Israeli soldiers had gone to train somewhere else instead.

This new house is a one-story white stone villa that looks like a giant ship sailing on a green grass sea. There is a small orchard and a hedge that surrounds everything like the edges of a huge box.

Our apartment is in the basement, so that we can be hidden from all eyes like rabbits in a burrow. Mother especially is happier underground, in this war-shelter-like place. But Father, although he says nothing about the move, appears sad. He was proud to own the house we lived in, proud of improving it as he liked. Here he cannot change anything, and there is no space for him to keep a goat and sing to it every evening like he did in the stone house. Singing helps Father feel happier.

Basel and Muhammad are content to run and play in a nearby meadow with other boys who gather for soccer games. But I continue to be afraid because the news on the radio speaks daily about death and fighting in many places. I do not know how far away the places they mention are from our house.

Father tries to help me overcome some of my anxious feelings. He explains that Vietnam is not nearby and the war there is not about us. Because Grandma's village in Jerusalem is called Beit Ikse—and dozens of other Palestinian villages begin with *Beit*—and because *nam* is also a word in Arabic, I had thought Vietnam was Beit Nam, and that its war was also near us.

Only when I enter the imaginative world of a story do I win

against the fear of war beginning again and destroying everything. Stories take me on an adventure and change my feelings, as though I am not me, but the main character in the story. I love becoming Sinbad, the fictional Arabian sailor. As I sail into mysteries, monsters hide everywhere, but I battle them and triumph, and always return home, bringing back gifts for everyone who waits for me.

I also triumph over fear by listening to old people tell of memories that bring peaceful, faraway worlds to me. I like how their faces light up when they describe the happy times of *bur-ryyah*, freedom. Their words give me hope and chase away my fears.



# Baba Noel



Our apartment consists of an L-shaped space that has two main rooms, one big and one small. The small room has a large window that brings in fresh orchard breezes. This room is where my siblings and I spread a straw rug on the floor, place our mattresses on top of it, and sleep at night. In the morning we stack the mattresses neatly and roll up the rug so the room can be used for daytime activities.

The big room has a long, horizontal glass panel up high that lets in light. But unlike the window, the panel cannot be opened. So the first day of our move, Mother stood on a chair, then on her toes, stretching herself all the way to reach the glass, and with red lipstick drew a big sun on it. “This way it will always be sunny,” she said, smiling as she jumped back to the floor.

Between the two rooms is a tiny kitchen that has a gas stove instead of the small and dangerous three-legged *baboor* that sat

in a corner of the stone house. Mother had to fill the *baboor* with kerosene over and over and warned us repeatedly to stay away from it. But children playing in the house, especially our young relatives when visiting, sometimes knocked off a boiling pot of food. My right leg has a scar from a burn from that *baboor*.

For the first time, we have hot and cold running water. This makes Mother dance as she turns the faucet on and off. Dancing is the way she celebrates. She announces that she does not ever again want to live anywhere without running water.

We also have a shower. After my sister, Mona, tried it for the first time and shouted for help when the hot water suddenly turned cold, I explained that a shower is like a private cloud. It will rain when we want it to. But because the heating of this cloud is done by solar panels, the temperature of the shower is up to the sun and weather, not us. Whenever someone uses the shower, Mona runs to announce that they are inside the cloud.

The biggest new addition to our life, however, is electric light. In each room a bulb hangs at the end of a long wire that dangles from the ceiling. When I want to turn the light on, I move the switch extremely slowly to savor the thrilling moment when the bulb comes to life and glows like a pear-shaped private moon. When the bulb swings from an evening breeze, big and small shadows dance across our walls. Mother holds up the hem of her dress and dances with them.

Because electricity is expensive, Father makes certain we do not waste any of it. He says every minute of light costs him a minute of work. So when I want to stay up and read at night,

Father and I agree that I can have half an hour of light if I am willing to tell him some stories from the books I read. This way he can continue his education. Father completed only one and a half grades of school because when he was a child Britain imposed heavy fees on Palestinian schools, leaving many parents forced to choose either food and clothing or education for their children. Jealous of the boys whose families could afford school fees, and sad that he had to work at a rock quarry at age eight, Father taught himself whenever he could and memorized parts of the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam, and many poems. But he does not read well enough to start a book and finish it.

However, he does know stories that have been told to him—religious and historical, and many parts of a long folktale called “Taghreebat Bani Hilal” (The diaspora of the Banu Hilal tribe). Their name means descendents of the crescent moon. In this half-real, half-fictitious story, Father says the main characters remain the same, but the story varies from city to city and country to country depending on the storyteller, so the plot is always full of surprises and you can hear it many times without knowing it completely.

Within the first month after we move into our apartment, Mother follows the Palestinian custom of introducing our family to our new neighbors by sending me to deliver a plate of delicious food to each of them.

“You are the *safeerah*, our ambassador,” she explains. “This is an important responsibility. The neighbors will judge all of

us by how you behave when they meet you. Do not pester them with questions; just deliver the food.” She shakes her hands up and down for emphasis, and waits for me to nod that I understand. “Remember to greet the person who opens the door by saying, ‘*Marbabab*, hello, I am the daughter of your new neighbor, Um Basel, Mother of Basel. Please accept this food from her.’ Any questions?”

“Yes,” I reply, even though I know the question I have is one she doesn’t want to hear. “Why do you always have to be called Um Basel? Can’t you be called Mother of Ibtisam on some days?” I ask for the hundredth time, although she has explained that a mother in Arab culture is called by the name of her first male child. “Can’t we change that custom in our family?”

As usual, she ignores me, and that makes me sad every time because I do not ever count in her name, not even on my birthday.

As Mother’s ambassador, I first go to meet the old man who lives above our apartment and owns the entire building. His name is Haj Hamd Allah. He always wears white-and-sky-blue-striped pajamas and a white knit cap, and carries the traditional phosphorous glow-in-the-dark *mashabab* of thirty-three prayer beads. Both Father and Grandma Fatima have a *mashabab*. It means that a person praises and thanks Allah all the time.

Haj Hamd Allah’s apartment is on top of our half of the basement and has a glass-enclosed veranda. He sits there in the afternoons to rest. We can see him from the street. When he

goes inside, we hear his footsteps moving above us like a slow bear, and we know exactly which room he is in.

Haj Hamd Allah watches me suspiciously as I climb the white stone steps that lead to his veranda, then stand at the door holding the plate of food. He seems to dislike children as much as I dislike his frown.

He calls for his granddaughter, Izdehar, to answer, and I am relieved. I met Izdehar shortly after we moved in. She visits him at the end of every week to cook his food, wash his clothes, and clean his house. For her last chore, Izdehar rolls up her sleeves to her elbows, her pants to her knees, and stands on a chair to clean the glass of the veranda. Then, with soapy water thick with bubbles, she scrubs the white stone steps.

The second time Izdehar and I spoke, she asked me if her grandfather goes out during the day. I told her that he only goes out occasionally to harvest some fruit from the trees in his orchard. Even though I did not mention that his frown frightens me, she said that Haj Hamd Allah is a kind man but has become withdrawn since her grandmother died.

Now Izdehar takes the plate and nudges her grandfather, who says to me, "I told your parents that you must stay away from my fruit trees, including the ones near your door. But I've changed my mind. Choose an apple and a plum tree to harvest."

I thank him and fly down the steps to tell Mother the news; then in minutes I am back at his door: "Mother says we will prune the orchard in return." As Haj Hamd Allah shows a rare smile, he also shows his perfect white set of dentures. When I

leave I am glad that he is happy. But the pruning, I think, will not only help him, it may help console Father for the loss of his goat because Father also loves to garden.

The second visit I make is to Um Ibrahim, the woman who lives in the other half of the basement. She wears a colorfully embroidered black *thawb*, the traditional Palestinian dress for women, and a white shawl, and has one brown eye and one blue eye. Seeing the food, she praises Mother's thoughtfulness and wants to know more about our family, especially the number of children.

"Three boys and two girls," I say. "The oldest is ten and a half, and the youngest is one."

"*Ma sha' Allah*, children are blessings," she replies.

"My parents want to have two more boys, so we will be five boys and two girls when that happens."

Um Ibrahim laughs. "But what if the babies are girls?"

"My parents prayed for boys only, and I am certain that Allah listens to people's prayers."

Against Mother's instructions not to do anything but deliver the food, I ask Um Ibrahim about herself.

"Come," she says. "I will show you." She leads me to a room that has two giant shiny steel containers. Together they are the size of a big bed and fill up most of the space. When she opens the first container, waves and waves of steam rise up as though the contents are boiling. But when I look inside I realize that the containers hold tubs of red and yellow ice cream.

“I make ice cream and my son Ibrahim transports it in thermoses to sell in villages every day. That is how we earn a living.”

I stand there mesmerized with pleasure, breathing in the fragrance of vanilla. I open my mouth to lick the ice cream fog and chase it with my tongue. Um Ibrahim laughs.

I have heard Ibrahim’s motorcycle’s annoying loud noise and seen the thermoses secured behind him, but never guessed that only a wall separated me and my family from a roomful of ice cream. Um Ibrahim empties the plate I brought to her, washes it, and fills it with the two flavors: strawberry and vanilla. She gives me sugar cones, too. The surprise at home turns our day into a feast. We do not have a refrigerator, so we eat it all at once.

The last family that lives in our building is the Asfoors. Their apartment is identical to Haj Hamd Allah’s, including a glass-enclosed veranda. But while Haj Hamd Allah’s veranda has a prayer rug showing the ninety-nine names of Allah, the Asfoors’ veranda has a big painting of the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus.

Mr. and Mrs. Asfoor stay home like Haj Hamd Allah. They have a son and a daughter, Nicholas and Camellia, in their twenties, and a young son, Issa, who is my age. Nicholas and Camellia go to work every weekday, but Nicholas works full-time and Camellia works half a day, coming home early to help her mother with housework.

It is Camellia who answers my knock. After taking the food, she offers me a cup of lemonade, which I drink. Gazing at the large painting of the Virgin Mary, I want to ask Camellia about

Christianity but wonder if Mother would be upset if she knew. I ask anyway.

I tell her that although my family is Muslim, one of Grandma's sisters became a Christian nun. That happened during the Great Depression, when many Western countries faced extreme economic hardships. Palestine and other regions that had come under British control after World War I, and had their political and economic lives ruled by Britain, faced severe hardships, too. A church adopted Grandma's sister and changed her name from Amenah to Mary. Now she lives in a convent in the Old City of Jerusalem, near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Because Mother calls her Aunt Mary, all of us do, too.

As a nun, Aunt Mary cannot marry or have children. She spends her days reading the Bible, praying, lighting candles, working for the church, and studying history, using the several languages she knows. She rarely speaks about Christianity to us. The only time she did was when she mentioned the name of Allah in a conversation. I asked her if Christians believe in Allah like Muslims do. She explained that as an Arab Christian she prays to Allah using the same name for God that Muslims use. *Allah* is the Arabic word that describes the One God that Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad believed in. The Hebrew Bible has the word *Elohim*.

Camellia acts like Aunt Mary. She does not want to talk about Christianity but says that she likes being a Christian living in Ramallah. She feels it is sacred to walk on the same land where Yasūaa', Jesus, walked and grew up.



“His footsteps are right here, under our footsteps,” she says.  
“His voice is under our voices.”

“What did Jesus say?” I ask.

“Love your neighbor!” she replies, smiling.

That makes me feel wonderful. Camellia is telling me that it is important to be good to your neighbors. I know that Islam says this, too. I wish someone could tell me how many religions there are in the world and what they believe.

Camellia then fills the plate I brought with a food I have never eaten before: living snails, inside their shells. “Take them to your mother,” she says. “Tell her they are delicious sautéed in garlic and olive oil.”

I take the snails to Mother and she asks that I deposit them, one by one, inside the stone wall around the orchard so that they can go on living.

“Are they a Christian food?” I ask. Muslims, unlike Christians, don’t eat pork or drink alcohol. Maybe we aren’t allowed to eat snails either.

“I only cook what your father can eat, and snails are not among your father’s foods,” she says.

In December, the Asfoor family sets up a tree decorated with lights in their glass veranda. It changes the feeling of the entire street. They are preparing to observe Christmas. I have not seen Christmas lights so close before. After looking at their tree, I make a finger-size one from pencil shavings that I glue around a stick planted inside a cup of dried mud. Small dots

from Mother's red nail polish are the lights. As I hear Christmas hymns played on the radio, I admire my tree.

Issa tells me that Baba Noel, Santa Claus, will be coming in the middle of the night on Christmas Eve to give him a present.

"In the middle of the night? Is he not afraid?" I ask.

"Santa only works at night. He is not a normal person."

Camellia adds that Baba Noel travels the world on a sleigh pulled by deer to help celebrate the birth of Jesus, which happened centuries ago in the city of Bethlehem, less than an hour from where we live in Ramallah.

"Is Santa's sleigh similar to Aladdin's magic carpet?" I ask.

"He has reindeer helping. Aladdin has a genie," Issa says.

On Christmas Eve I find every excuse possible to open the door and run outside to see if Baba Noel has arrived in our neighborhood. I want to glimpse him even if for a second. Finally, Mother locks the door and puts the key in her pocket. I stand by the window waiting, but in spite of myself, I fall asleep before midnight.

I wake up to my parents speaking. "Who could be knocking at this hour?" Father says.

"I hope they are not soldiers," Mother murmurs. My brothers and sister quickly wake up, too.

Standing near but not opening the door, Father asks, "*Meen elly barra?*" Who is outside?

The answer comes back gently, almost like a whisper, accompanied by a tiny bell ringing softly: "Baba Noel."

"Baba who?" Father has no idea who Santa Claus is.

The voice answers again: "Baba Noel looking for Issa."

Now Father opens the door to see Santa's face, beard, and red suit.

I shout that Issa's apartment is on the other side of the building.

Soon after, my parents, brothers, sister, and I hear a car drive off.

"He is only a man wearing a costume," Mother explains, hoping to calm us down. "I can make a suit like his and let you wear it, too. Now go to sleep!"

But I stay up thinking about Issa's present. The next day when he does not volunteer to tell me what Santa gave him, I do not ask. But I ask everyone in my family what they would want if Santa could bring them something.

Muhammad: The best food, and to be the strongest person in the world so no one can hit me . . .

Mona: A whole shop of beautiful clothes and toys . . .

Mother: To become rich and spend all my time learning new things . . .

Basel: No one has asked me this before. I want to think about it longer before answering . . .

Me: One big book that has all the stories of the world in it, and a tree that grows pens and pencils . . .

Father: Freedom, and a cure for narcolepsy . . .

Everyone shakes their heads, adding to their wishes a cure for narcolepsy.

# fingerprints



It is the middle of February, the month nicknamed *shbat al-khabbat*, the batterer, because of the big cold storms that whip our world. Outside, the wind is whistling. A thick fog is making it hard to see the orchard from our window. It has not stopped raining all day. There is so much rain that the large well in the yard filled up as fast as if it were a teacup. I am happy that February is a short month.

We are gathered around the tall green space heater, rubbing our hands together for warmth as we wait for Father to come home from work. The chattering of our teeth magnifies the trembling of our hearts.

“*Ta’akkkhar ktbeer!* He is so late,” Mother says. She bites her lip and holds back tears. She also holds her pregnant belly. There is nothing she can do. Father does not tell us where he goes each day because he does not know his destination. After

he leaves in the morning, he drives to places he is told to go to pick up or deliver goods, and comes home in the evening not wanting to speak of work, except on the days when he reaches the sea or visits a new city, town, or village. He also tells us about when he passes by old Palestinian towns that have become depopulated because of wars and are now nothing but names and neglected ruins. He has seen many of them when they were full of people, so he describes to us how they were in the past, too, and with his words he brings them back to life for us.

My brothers Basel and Muhammad are passing the anxious time by talking about the accident our father had in Jerusalem several months ago during a school vacation when they were with him. Because Father has narcolepsy, he often falls asleep while driving, so Basel and Muhammad, when not in school, accompany him so they can wake him up if he falls asleep. Whenever his head droops, they shout and shake him. He usually wakes up quickly. But the accident last year left Father with broken ribs and Basel with his arm in a cast for weeks.

Father's narcolepsy has worsened over time. It started when he was twenty-five years old, ten years before he married Mother, and he has tried many medicines and ways to cope. But even the three electric-shock treatments he received from doctors in Jordan could not heal him.

He falls asleep while doing anything. It can happen every five minutes or every few hours. Sometimes, halfway through

dinner, his spoon hangs in the air, then drops from his hand. As he sleeps, Father slides lower and lower in his seat.

When guests visit us, he often closes his eyes while they speak to him. After he wakes up, he is confused and embarrassed. But everyone ignores what has happened, and someone makes a quick summary of what has been said so he can rejoin the conversation.

Father takes many anti-sleeping pills, prescribed for him by a psychiatrist in East Jerusalem, drinks mud-thick coffee and deep-dark tea, but all of this has become ineffective. I am disappointed in medicine for not offering a cure for narcolepsy and wish the famous Muslim doctor Ibn Sīnā could come from the eleventh century to the twentieth and help him.

Father fights for his life every work hour as he tries to stay awake while driving, especially because the hum of the road lulls him to sleep behind the wheel. In Islam we believe in angels, so I imagine that Allah sends many angels who work frantically to make sure that Father is safe.

We have begged him to find different work, but driving is the only job Father loves to do. He makes clear to all of us that he will continue getting up at dawn, before the sun rises, praying to Allah, then going to work, until he is dead. "Have your feelings and let me work." He shrugs. "What other family in the world has a father who can drive with his eyes closed?"

Finally we hear heavy steps splashing in the puddles outside and see Father appear in the fog. He is swaying left and right, and we see that he is holding his hand tightly.

“Take me to the hospital,” he mutters the moment Mother opens the door.

There is blood on his wet clothes.

Instantly I am at the Asfoors’, knocking on their door and explaining that Father is hurt and asking them to make a phone call for a taxi to take him to the hospital.

When the taxi arrives, Father, leaning on Nicholas and supported by my older brothers and the driver, is driven to the hospital. I write a prayer in the form of a letter to Allah asking for forgiveness for any mistakes I might have made that contributed to Allah making Father get hurt, and then I ask Allah to protect Father’s life.

Father comes home early the next morning with a bandaged hand and a pale complexion. Several days later he is able to speak about the accident for the first time.

He says that even though he lost part of his thumb, he is happy he did not die, and for that he will pray extra times in gratitude. He then explains: As he was coming home he got a flat tire, so he parked the truck on the side of the road. He was only half a mile away, but he thought that because of the rain and fog and the lack of streetlights, it would be unwise to leave the truck there for the night. Other cars could easily crash into it, risking someone’s life. So he raised it up on a jack to fix the tire. He had done this many times before. But because of the mud, the jack slipped, and the truck fell onto his thumb and severed it.

Without thinking, and before the shocking pain overtook

him, he picked up the piece of his thumb and pressed it back to where it was before. He then ran and walked in the storm, sometimes silent, sometimes howling his pain, until he got home.

*“Behyat rabbak,* by the name of Allah, find a different kind of job,” Mother pleads once again when Father is ready to go back to work. He resists at first because he does not want to hear such talk, but then he finds a job as a school guard. He sticks with it for a few weeks, then quits because when he falls asleep the boys sneak out through the school gate. He cannot wake up to stop them, and he feels ashamed and humiliated when the teachers see this.

At home, he bangs his fists on the wall in impatience, angry tears in his eyes. And he grieves that in losing part of his thumb he lost part of his fingerprint, his identity. When letting himself feel this loss, he also finds himself remembering how much he misses a world that his thumb once touched: his mother’s face, his father’s hands—both of whom are dead—his many relatives whom he does not see because borders are closed.

As Father battles his demons, it is getting closer to the time when Mother will have the baby. Father still cannot find a job that doesn’t involve driving, so the upcoming birth adds to his worries, and rather than cheering him it makes him feel sad and burdened.

He tells Mother that he will not borrow money from anyone



to pay for the birth expenses. So he goes back to being a truck driver.

Mother disagrees strongly, urging him to have hope that he can find work that does not put his life in danger every day.

“Driving is my destiny,” he shouts at her.

One night they argue so loudly that I am sure all the neighbors must hear them. Then Father turns against himself. As we watch, he takes off a shoe and hits himself repeatedly on the head with it. We look at one another in astonishment as he explains that he is punishing himself for not knowing how to solve his problems.

Father then confesses that his soul is wrestling with him about whether to leave or stay, filling him with an anguish he cannot bear. He says that he is tortured and announces that his soul no longer wants to live in the pain of his mind and body; it wants to grab his last breath and leave forever.

We gaze at him, not knowing what he means. But the next day he tells us.

# Despair



“I want to die,” Father says after he comes home early from work. We are speechless as he continues. “Day and night, I worry about having an accident. And it is not because I fear death. On the contrary, I welcome its great relief.” He flings his arms high. “I am tormented about leaving all of you with no one to support or protect you in this merciless world.” He pulls the keys for the truck from his pocket and shakes them nervously. “But God, who understands that I face unbearable daily battles, and that I’m too weary to go on, will forgive me.” He turns to leave.

Now we understand that Father is saying goodbye to us. There is complete silence in the room before we all say that we will go with him anywhere in life, in death, in the after-life, or any other place. We run to put on our jackets and shoes.

We are all talking at the same time. If Allah finds that Father

was wrong to do this and sends him to hell, we can go there, too, as one family. We can tell Allah that we wanted to die with Father, that we prefer to go together, just as we did when we fled the stone house in the Six-Day War. But now we flee to God.

Father shakes his head and silently walks to the truck. He is determined. Mother makes sure that everything in the apartment is neatly in place. She does not want people who will see our apartment later on to say that she was a messy housekeeper. Such words would be harsher than death for her, and would make her unhappy all the way from Ramallah to the afterlife. When she is satisfied, she wobbles out and gets into the truck next to Father. Mona helps Samer climb up, and they sit on opposite sides of Mother's pregnant belly.

Basel, Muhammad, and I ride on the bed of the truck. Now a strange feeling of happiness fills the world. We are going to end all our problems at once and never be separated from one another.

As we leave the city behind, Father waves goodbye to the drivers of the cars we pass. They wave back. When Father reaches the empty winding roads where there aren't even shepherds tending goats on the surrounding hills, he begins to speed up.

Basel, Muhammad, and I respond by jumping up and down on the bed of the truck, which is now bouncing like a trampoline under us. We try to jump higher and higher. We lose our balance, fall down, then get up to play again. When we spot a roll of toilet paper inside a tub of tools, we unfurl it in the wind

to create a long tail for the speeding truck. The toilet paper strip gets longer and longer and ripples in the wind. We sing and laugh ecstatically.

Father starts to press harder on the gas pedal, and Mother begins to ask him to stop. "*Suleiman!*" She shouts father's name. "*Waqgef! Waqgef!*" Stop! Stop! My parents are speaking faster than the speeding truck, and their words come out of the open windows and reach us.

But nothing matters to Basel, Muhammad, and me. One thing is on our minds: we do not want Father to die alone and for us to be left behind. Now we are saying our prayers and letting go of the scenes behind us.

Father continues to drive faster and faster. I think that the truck will veer off the road and be destroyed, and then the angels that know Father from helping him when he sleeps will come and pick us up and take us to heaven. The toilet paper roll has nothing left now except the cardboard piece, which we use as a microphone to magnify our final words.

The truck comes to a sudden stop. Father turns off the engine, and my parents get out and walk to a field. They continue their tense exchange of words, and their bodies speak, too, leaning and turning, their hands waving in the air. It is like they are dancing their high-pitched conversation, questions and answers, around each other.

When they return, sweat is rolling down their faces and they are strangely quiet. Father's face is soft, as if he had never been angry. He starts the truck and drives slowly and carefully, which

is not as exciting for us as the fast driving. When we reach a small town, he parks near a falafel shop. The owner is a friend of his. He sees how exhausted Father is, so he gives us sandwiches and sodas. "On me!" he announces when Father wants to pay. Later we go home feeling closer to Father and to one another than ever before.

"What happened?" I ask Mother the next day.

"Because we showed him that we loved him so much, that we would die with him, it made him want to live again," she says. "But let us forget that it ever happened."

Although no one speaks of that event, I continue to think about it. And I dream of a time in the future when I can work so that Father does not have to pay for my expenses, and when I have enough money, I will buy him all that he likes. He can sleep, eat, have a goat, and sing to it all day.

Soon after, Mother gives birth to my brother Najm, the fourth boy in our family. During the forty days following his birth, the special period of time for women to recover after giving birth, Grandma Fatima comes to help out often and our house fills with women bringing baby clothes, sky-blue blankets, chocolate, stories, and words of congratulations.

We use the candy that people bring us to offer as treats to the people who come after them. Mother saves most of the baby clothes she is given unopened in the packages so she does not have to buy presents in the future when visiting friends and relatives with their own newborns.

When the women look at me and pay the customary compliment of wishing for my marriage day, Mother firmly objects: "Why wish the unhappiness of early marriage on her?" That makes me think that Mother is not happy that she married Father when she was just fifteen. The women quickly change the subject.

Father's sister, Aunt Rasmeyyah, comes to visit from Jerusalem. She mentions that one of her sons wants to ask for my hand in marriage and will wait until I finish high school if necessary. Today she is only checking to see if my parents would agree. Mother lets me answer. I reply that my aunt's son has his own two hands; why does he need mine? I need both of my hands and will not give them to anyone.

Mother then points to me and says, "Is this an answer from someone who should be thinking of marriage? She is only eight years old, too young to even know what you mean."

"There is no problem in asking," Aunt Rasmeyyah chastises. "The Prophet Muhammad married a young girl."

"That was over thirteen hundred years ago," Mother shoots back. "And when your son becomes a prophet, we can reconsider." She smiles and my aunt smiles, too, but promises to ask again in the future.

I go to watch the men who are here to congratulate us on the birth. They sit outside with Father and speak about work, land, politics, religion, children, past and present wars, and the latest operations of armed resistance by the fedayeen. The

resistance gives Father and the men hope that living under the occupation may not be forever.

Among the guests is Father's friend Abu Qassem. After he sees Father's thumb, he offers him a job in his business to spare him the risk of being on the road. Father agrees to try because he knows that it would please Mother.

Abu Qassem's business, however, is nothing more than a wooden cart a few feet long and a few feet wide. It is piled up with a myriad of random items: children's clothes, plates, plastic cups, aluminum colanders, baby shoes, hair combs and clips, loofahs, hand mirrors, whistles, boxes of matches, batteries, and so on.

The cart is parked every day at the edge of the main *besbeh*, the farmers' market, near the Upper Ramallah central bus station. Thousands of people come through the station every morning and afternoon on their way to and from work. Rows of vendors are parked there, and shoppers stand in lines for the carts as much as they stand in lines for the buses.

A few weeks into the new job with Abu Qassem, Father tells us that he falls asleep at this job, too, but wakes up quickly because the buses make loud noises coming and going, and the farmers and vendors shout most of the time as they sell their goods.

A whole year passes like the shadow of a speeding cloud. I am almost done with the fourth grade when Mother becomes

pregnant again. I am wondering if she will become like Aunt Amina, whom we've heard just had her eleventh girl. But Mother tells everyone this will be her last child.

I am happy to hear this because having more boys adds to my chores. Most Palestinian families, such as ours, do not ask boys to do any housework. Girls cook, mop the floors, wash dishes, do laundry, fold the clothes, clean windows, and organize the house while the boys either run errands or have jobs outside, or play sports and spend a lot of time with their friends.

I think my job in the family should be to do only one-sixth of the work, my exact share, and then I should be allowed to play like a boy. When I grow up and am free, I promise myself I will not wash even one dish.

Over the past year, we had all begun to think that Father had finally found the right job, but he announces that one year of working at Abu Qassem's cart is enough.

"Every time I see the buses and drivers coming and going, while I am standing in one place all day arguing with old and young women about prices, the feeling of loss crushes me," he complains. "When I drove, I felt the freedom of seeing open fields, sunrises, sunsets, wild animals, the change of seasons, forests of olive trees, groves of orange trees, and I was in constant prayer for Allah to help me with my sleeping plight. As I drove, I even forgot that the land had become contested. No one can contest the fragrance of citrus groves in Tūlkarm, or the celestial yellow of the banana groves of Jericho."



Abu Qassem and Father have known each other for a long time, so they part in business but remain close friends. Quickly, Father finds what he hoped for: an owner of a truck who needs a driver to deliver produce. Father can begin work in one month, and he will go all over the West Bank, to Jerusalem and many other cities again, but he cannot keep the truck in Ramallah at night. It is to be parked in the nearby town of Beitunia, where the owner of the truck lives. For that job, our family must move again. If we move to Beitunia, within a few blocks of the owner's house, Father can keep the truck at night, too, and if he pays for the extra fuel, he can use it for the move and for other family needs.

When I go to see Um Ibrahim for the last time, she piles up so much ice cream for me that I have to ask her to stop. She then asks if I am still sure the baby Mother is going to have will be a boy. I say that I am certain because Allah likes my father and answers his prayers or else Father would have been dead a long time ago.

Haj Hamd Allah watches from his glass veranda as we leave for Beitunia. He has the same expression he always has when he looks at people going and coming. I am surprised that I have the same feeling I had when we left the stone house—wanting to cry on the inside because I'm losing my home, and happy that I have many memories I can take with me.