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## Our Family Trees

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Our Family Trees

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Divisions of Language and Literature  
and Social Studies  
of Bard College

by

Juliet Hadid

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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I couldn't have done any of this without my advisors, so thanks to Dina Ramadan, for helping me see where this project was going and for your patience while I figured out how to get it there. Thanks to Joseph O'Neill, for your confidence in me. And thanks to Tabetha Ewing, for the first push. Madeline Minke, your interest in this project through all of its reimaginings has been a gift. Thank you. And thanks to my family, especially Grandy and my mother for teaching me how to write. Most of all, thank you, Siti, for sharing your story with me.



steadily-increasing flow of Jewish migrants to Palestine, as the authors of the Mandate had intended. Factors including the actions of Zionist paramilitary organizations against Palestinian civilians and British troops, as well as strong public opinion in favor of the removal of Jewish WWII refugees from Europe to Palestine, precipitated the British government's decision to terminate the mandate in 1947. The question of Palestine's transition from British occupation to Israeli occupation was put to the United Nations General Assembly, where on November 29<sup>th</sup> of 1947, the two-year old United Nations resolved that Palestine should be partitioned into a Jewish state and a Palestinian state. All of Palestine, at this point, was populated by Palestinians who had called the same land home for generations. The news that more than half of Palestine would become part of a Jewish state in just six months, in the context of increasing Jewish aggression towards their Palestinian neighbors, was taken with outrage. It was clear that the creation of a Jewish state was intended to facilitate the resettlement of larger numbers of Jewish migrants to Palestine, but the land proposed for their resettlement was obviously already occupied. The UN partition plan did not stipulate what would happen to the Palestinian occupants of the land promised to the Zionist project. It was not a question the UN was prepared to answer, and they knew they would not have to. The Zionist paramilitaries were more than happy to step up and solve the problem by forcing Palestinians from their homes.

Immediately after the UN Resolution, Palestinian leadership, in the form of the Arab Higher Committee, called for a three-day general strike from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> of December in protest. December 21<sup>st</sup> marked the effective beginning of al-Nakba (meaning "the catastrophe")<sup>1</sup>. On that day, well-armed Zionist militias commenced attacks on Palestinian villages. The Zionist soldiers numbered almost fifty thousand, and they had already built substantial stockpiles of

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1 Mazin B. Qumsiyeh, *Popular Resistance in Palestine*, London: 2011. 95.

would be pushed off of their land. The count is indefinite, but it was something around 500 Palestinian villages that were completely demolished during al-Nakba. There were 33 separate massacres, including the infamous Deir Yassin Massacre on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1948. There, 107 people were killed in a day, and the village was destroyed. 110 Israeli militiamen attacked the village at the first light of day. They threw grenades into the homes of villagers, killing whole families at a time. A mere seven of these victims were killed in combat, fighting to protect their families. The rest were cut down in cold blood. “Haya Al-Balbisi, a 19-year-old teacher from Jerusalem who was not in Deir Yassin at the time, rushed back to help the villagers. She was shot while treating an injured villager”<sup>2</sup>.

This spring, my Arabic class endeavored to translate a poem by Mahmoud Darwish, one of his poems that everyone knows. It was “Bitaqat Hawiya”, the Darwish poem I’ll quote from later in the project. The name means “Identity Card”, that small document that lets Israelis through the wall and stops Palestinians in their tracks. He published it in 1964 and it was adapted into a popular protest song. For the crime of being its author, he was placed under house arrest for three years, 1967-1970. In 1970, he fled Palestine for the second time, seeking his freedom.

The Green Line was the line that marked the end of Israeli territory after the war of 1948. It a cease-fire line, not a permanent border, though it is seen on maps today as the border of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Gaza was under Egyptian rule from 1948-1967, and the West Bank was annexed by Jordan “as a trust in its hands until the Palestine case is fully solved in the interests of its inhabitants”<sup>3</sup>. Israel agreed to the armistice line, but to their military leaders the war was not over. On the 29<sup>th</sup> of October, 1956, Israel invaded Egypt in order to take control of

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 96.

<sup>3</sup> From a Resolution published by the Arab League Council, cited in Yehuda Z. Blum, *Will "Justice" Bring Peace?: International Law - Selected Articles and Legal Opinions*, Leiden: 2016. 230.

But tonight  
 The blood of fifty victims  
 Has turned it into a red pool.  
 Please don't blame me if I can't come;  
 They've murdered me, too.<sup>4</sup>

The Armistice Line didn't hold. In 1967 Israel forced the second mass expulsion of Palestinians from their land. This is called al-Naksa in Arabic, meaning 'the setback'. The name positions it as the follow-up to al-Nakba in 1948, the second in a series. It also carries the faith that this series of disasters was coming to an end. The first was a catastrophe, but the next one was only a setback—by this point, there was an organized resistance movement fighting to maintain the homeland, and they sought to reassure people that 1967 was only a setback. With unceasing resistance, soon, this nightmare must end.

The irony is painful. 1967 was not a mere setback to an ultimately successful resistance movement. It was the moment when Israel took military control over all of Palestine. Their hold was not uncontested—in Palestine, the resistance remained strong. But as the state of Israel tested the strength of the rules governing their occupation laid down by the UN in 1947, they found no resistance. The UN did not act to stop their project to ethnically 'cleanse' all of Palestine. No international body stepped up to defend the partition plan or the remaining rights of Palestinians within the part of their country kept for them by the UN partition plan. To the leadership of the Israeli military, this was a green light. No one moved to rectify the human rights abuses and the illegal territory grab the military committed in 1967, and they knew the limits of the UN plan would not be enforced. They could act with impunity.

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4 Mahmoud Darwish, "Victim #18", *Splinters of Bone*, trans. B.M. Bennani, New York: 1974. 25-26.

war and the following weeks 430,000 Palestinians were displaced from their homes. Many joined the 1948 refugees in Syria and Jordan.

Naila lived in Bir Zeit for thirteen years. She was twelve when she and her family became part of the 430,000 fleeing Israeli occupation, two weeks before her thirteenth birthday.



would think the whole place evaporated into thin air when the Israelis arrived. First Haifa, with all of its donkey carts and fruit groves, gone in a puff of smoke as they fled eastward in 1948. Yabrud and Birzeit were disappeared almost twenty years later, and he did not flee this time, but fought until he was pushed out. You could practically see it—he and his brothers-at-arms cross the Jordan, and Palestine is pulled away, like a star being swallowed by a black hole. But it still existed, and someone could get on a plane and fly there. Naomi did it. I asked my father about it. Three years later, he took us back to meet his family. I packed *Habibi*, which I had never returned to the library.

The author's biography in my first book of free verse told me Nye had grown up sort of like me. Nye's father had come to America many years before ours had, but he was a grown man, leaving his mother and father behind. They remained living in a village in the West Bank called Sinjil. It is smaller than Bir Zeit and bigger than Yabrud, and not very far from either of them. I put an aerial photo of Yabrud side by side with one of Sinjil, to compare our histories. Both are ringed by terraced hillsides full of old olive trees, and in both pictures there is a wide road crossing through the northeast corner of the photo. It is the same road, if you follow it north from Yabrud you will come to the village of Nye's father.

It was not long after I returned from our summer meeting Papa's family that I found another book of hers in a used bookstore. This was free verse again, and all of the poems were about Palestine. It was called *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*, but I can't remember a poem about any place but Palestine in the whole book.

Her father, who I had met first in *Habibi*, reappeared in these poems. He spoke odes to the fig tree in the backyard of the house in Texas and I remembered my father carefully

to read. This was my first attempt at understanding my family's history through an academic lens, but I was confident that I already knew the matter inside and out. For ten minutes, I explained to my classmates about the injustices happening in Palestine, the systems in place which upheld the occupation (our own government among them), and why it was imperative that we take action.

My solution? Don't buy Sabra hummus.

It was a wasted opportunity. I had a captive audience, and I diligently appealed to their senses of pathos, ethos, and logos. I had many of them convinced, by the end of my speech, that there was no moral ground on which the occupation of Palestine could stand. But even as I begged them to act against it, I couldn't see how.

Every time I picked up a newspaper, for longer than I could remember, I would scan the pages for the word Palestine (and reluctantly, Israel, which was easier to find). Sometimes, I would find it on the front page. Usually I would see it tucked into a corner of page B4 in the "World" section. I scavenged papers for the news of my father's homeland, looking closely for some hint of better times on the horizon.

There was a lot said about the promise of the two-state solution, and who was I to say differently? The wall made it hard to conceive of as a solution, but this was the only path to peace that was given any credence in the papers I read. I understood 'peace' as the return of Seido's Palestine. Replanting the trees he remembered. Of course this was the goal.

But with everything I knew, and everything I had read, I couldn't see how to get there. Finally I lit upon the BDS campaign. The aim was to end the occupation, which was vague but

Egyptians and their revolutionary wishes for a better world, an Egyptian government that responded to their cries. All of April and May, as I anticipated our trip, newspaper headlines told of the new developments in the uprising that was sweeping the southern shore of the Mediterranean. Would it turn the corner?

We all wondered what would come of it, and we all had high hopes. I wanted to fly to Cairo. I looked up the flight from Amman, and told my dad it was very affordable. "We could just visit for a week?" I thought I was being reasonable.

"It's cheap because no sane person wants to go there," he told me, and Siti agreed. But we sat around her kitchen table talking about the Arab Spring for hours while we planned the details of our trip, and for once my mother didn't complain about having the TV on, she was fixated on the subtitles of the Al Jazeera program.

By now, the dust has settled and new despots have replaced most of the old ones. Naila blames American involvement, and says that Egypt was better off before the uprising. Now, their leader is all too happy to work with the Americans and the Israelis, which always spells trouble for Palestine. He doesn't seem to be any good for Egypt either.

But that summer, before anyone knew how things would turn out, Naila's kitchen table saw the birth of many hopeful plans.

"You can see Cairo afterwards," she told me. "Now, your father's right. It's too dangerous. We'll go back in a few years."

I wanted to see the revolution. Siti wanted to see the better world everyone was hoping for. In the end, I agreed. It would be better to visit Cairo after Mubarak was gone, and see the country with a new leader and new life. It isn't happening like we thought it would.

stayed. She only left Palestine years later, when she was engaged to Ibraheim, and she left on a visa with her citizenship intact. This means her children can go to Palestine and stay as long as they want, and I envy them enormously for that—but there are plenty of strings attached. They have green ID cards, marking them as Palestinian. Citizens of Israeli-occupied land, but not citizens of Israel.

The difference was made clear as we reached the bridge. Ibraheim drove us to the first checkpoint, where we all got out of the car. He got out too, helped us with our luggage, and hugged us all and kissed his cheeks. “Don’t get in any trouble,” he told Bahaa’, his youngest, with only a hint of pleading in his tone.

The soldier at the first checkpoint asked to see our passports. Israeli citizens with blue IDs, like the man in front of us, got into sedans and were driven over the bridge to the Passport Control office. Foreigners, like us, got onto large tour buses. And Palestinians like Amjed and Bahaa’ got onto separate tour buses. We waved to them as we parted ways. Though they had been on this bridge many times before, and knew what to expect, no one had warned us. We thought we would see them again in half an hour or so, as we collected our luggage and resumed our journey to Yabrud—Mapquest said the drive from Amman to Ramallah was just a handful of hours.

We sat on the bus without moving for easily four hours. It was the hottest part of the day in the valley of the Jordan river. The irrigated banana groves out the windows to our left were thriving. The people crowding the non-air-conditioned buses were not.

We each had a full bottle of water—my mother hadn’t known about the extensive wait at the bridge, but she knew plenty about road trips with four kids, and she had come prepared. The

“From Haifa.”

“And what is the purpose of your trip?”

“To see the country.” (We promised Papa not to call it Palestine.) “And to visit family.”

“Where is your family?”

“Mostly in Yabrud. Also some in Ramallah and Bir Zeit.”

“Are you going anywhere else on your trip?”

“Yes. We’re going to see the Mediterranean and we want to visit Jerusalem and Bethlehem too.” (Naila had insisted that we add Bethlehem, because they like Christians, she said. My mother agreed, and said besides, we should pick up some souvenirs from the Church of the Nativity for Marcy, our next-door neighbor who taught us about the Christmas Story.)

The interview was repetitive—he sent me back to the waiting area, still holding my passport, and ten or fifteen minutes later a woman came to get me. We sat in a nearly identical office and she asked me the same questions in a different order. My answers, which I had practiced carefully, did not change.

One by one, they processed my siblings, my parents, my grandmother, and my aunt. We each collected our passports, visas now attached, and sat waiting in the plastic chairs outside of the interview room, scanning the lines of people for any sign of my dad’s cousins. It had been about five hours since we had parted ways on the other side of the bridge, and we had no idea when they would be let through.

My older sister, Maya, received her visa last. We gathered up all of our luggage and followed my dad out the door of the passport control office, where he found a taxi to bring us to the rental car lot in Jericho. The sun was low in the west but the air in the valley was still hot and

The drive wasn't long, but I was dozing off by the time we could see Ramallah's lights in the distance. I shook myself awake as we pulled into Yabrud. We were staying at Abdul Raouf's house—my grandfather's brother. Abdul Raouf and his wife Shamia were staying with family in Chico, California, and had told us to make ourselves at home. There was a patio in the front, with a flower garden and a plum tree on the right, which I could see in the faint bluish light from the porchlight of the house next door. There was an enclosed front porch and a double metal door, which stuck at first and then made a horrible grating sound as my dad pushed it open. Because all of their children live in America now, Abdul Raouf and Shamia are often away for half the year, and the house is empty.

It felt very quiet as we walked in single-file—my dad had only opened one side of the double door, and said he'd ask his uncle, a mechanic in Bir Zeit, for some oil for the hinges. We spread out, opening doors, flipping switches, and getting our bearings in the unfamiliar house. We found the bathroom and a bedroom, and a very strange second living room adjoining the porch. I found a staircase and bounded up to the roof. It had plexiglass water heaters and clotheslines, and I looked down and saw a trellis of grape vines in the back yard. The light was poor but I could see some fruit. I ran to the other side, to look out over the town, and saw that there were lights on in the windows of the house across the street. A small group of people was walking down the road in our direction, which I thought was a strange thing in such a small town at eleven at night.

"I found Indo-Mei!" called my mom from the kitchen, and I ran back downstairs to help find a big enough pot. We were all tired from the heat, and thought we'd go to bed soon, but I was too hungry to fall asleep right away, and so was she. So was everyone, it turned out, so we

covered by the trellis of grapes that I had seen from the roof. It was beautiful, but it blocked nearly all of the light, and I found the mint growing on the far edge of the patio by picking a piece and smelling it.

I gathered a fat handful of short sprigs without counting them. I wasn't sure how many people there were in the living room, I only knew it was a lot, and there were men on the porch, too. After I had all the mint I thought we'd need, I picked a bunch of ripe grapes from above, and brought it all inside. My sister was spooning sugar into cups.

"I don't think that's enough cups."

"Find me some more."

I plunked my harvest onto a cutting board and looked through all the cupboards for a second set of cups. I found them in the back of the pots cabinet on a little shelf—count on Shamia to have backups.

We ate the grapes while the tea steeped and spat the seeds through a hole in the kitchen window screen.

Even though it was someone else's house, waking up the next morning after our impromptu housewarming party, I felt at home. I looked across the street and saw the house of relatives who we'd met last night. We weren't the only foreigners in a Yabrud that summer, our neighbors across the street had family visiting from Chicago. Two nights later, July fourth, we sat on the roof with them and watched fireworks light up the sky, courtesy of a wedding across the valley in Silwad.

Mostafa Elostaz, my professor at Al-Quds University, asked me if my grandfather had told me piles of lies about the “old country”. I wish I could answer him. I will never see the Haifa my grandfather told me about, so I will never be able to verify his truths and his lies. When I imagined Palestine, I imagined the smell of orange blossoms on the salty wind. Now, I can see it in my own memories, and I remember the smell of burning garbage that no government will properly dispose of. I want to know what will happen to the garbage after liberation.

I have never seen Palestine in the spring. Summer, fall, and winter, yes. When I picture free Palestine, I picture it in the spring. What about Aliya? Does she see herself standing on top of tall building in the old city, three generations of her family restored to their home, one on top of another? Climbing jasmine vines perfuming the night air? Does she see piles of rubble where the wall stood? I don't think she sees the smoke from burning garbage heaps.



The town of Bir Zeit gets its name from the surrounding hills, which are covered in olive trees. Pressing the fruit into oil is one of the primary occupations within the town during the season of harvest. The fall in Bir Zeit is bustling—the whole family, even young children, spend days in the orchards. Deft young boys boast about who climbs the highest and the fastest. There are hearty picnics under the olive trees as everyone takes a break to drink tea and eat their fill. The olives are caught in cloths spread in the grass and loaded into carts.

Naila grew up in Bir Zeit. She was born in the town in 1954 and lived there until she was almost thirteen, except a few summers which she spent inside the walls of the old city of Jerusalem, living with her grandmother. All of this was called Palestine, though it wasn't all that was called Palestine. The coins she counted when she went out to buy coffee and flour and watermelons brought down from Jenin in the summer were Jordanian dinars, but not even the king of Jordan, living on the other side of the river, called it Jordan or anything but Palestine (some old men still called it al-Sham, and some still do, but it is understood that Palestine is part of bilad al-Sham). There was a fence separating the West Bank, including the city of Jerusalem, apart from the rest of Palestine.

Naila never went to the fence, but she said that she has heard you could stand up against it and see through, and touch the fingers of people you knew who had gotten stuck on the other side. There were never any permits, however. If you knew anyone on the side of the fence that had been occupied in 1948, you would not be able to visit them. You would not be able to return to your old home for a day trip, if you had been forced to leave in 1948.

explained the unfamiliar words in Arabic. Both Walid and Naila speak English, and Wael is much more comfortable in English than in Arabic, but this was a private conversation. Walid was not comfortable having it in front of my mother. I heard little, and understood less. The topic, I think, was the land. Abdul Kareem's land in Yabrud, which was in the name of Naila and her children. None of them have Palestinian citizenship, not since 1967, and there is the looming possibility that it will be seized from our family for Israeli settlers, jeopardizing the safety of everyone remaining in Yabrud.

I made a game of hopping from rock to rock without touching the ground. I took the easiest path between them and ended up somewhat diverted from the rest of the family, eyes scanning the ground for rocks close enough to land on and not looking up. "Ta'ali, Juliet! Come back here!" Siti called to me from across the field. She jerked her head to point at something behind me, I turned around to see the tower looming out of the grass, closer than I had reckoned. I had seen it earlier, from the car. There was no missing it from the road, it stood in a dotted line of many others by the periphery of Birzeit University campus, like the rooks from a dozen chess sets. But I was forty or fifty feet from the base now and it was vastly more imposing up close. I didn't look for very long. If Siti wouldn't point at it, she feared it was occupied. I didn't want to catch a soldier's eye and find myself staring down the barrel of his gun. I hopped from the rock onto the earth beneath and ran to my grandmother. My sisters and I spent the rest of our walk glancing over our shoulders discreetly and wondering if we were being watched.

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trying to act tough. Their mother was not fooled, she knew her children were scared. Naila turned thirteen on the twenty-first of June, sixteen days after the madness began. Gunshots still rang in her ears.

Her father opened an auto shop in Mufrak, the same work he had been doing in Bir Zeit. It wasn't quite starting from scratch, but he had gotten to know the people in Bir Zeit well, and also the particularities of all their cars. In Mufrak, his neighbors were strangers still, though many of the strangers were also refugees, from other parts of Palestine. It did not take him long to settle in, and work up a repartee with his new customers (and their cars).

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In 1939, Abdul Kareem was born in Haifa, and spent the first nine years of his life in the family home on the Mediterranean coast. In 1948, his father Abdullah was shot to death by Israeli soldiers while walking home from the orange groves behind a donkey and a cart. The cart was full of oranges, and with the harvest would come some spare money, hopefully, which could be put away in a hidden jar for safekeeping. That was about as close as anyone could come to security in such volatile times.

The soldiers insisted Abdullah empty his cart on the pretense that he might be smuggling arms and ammunition under his crop of fruit. Who can say? Abdul Kareem did not stick around while the soldiers beat his father's body and laid waste to the crop of oranges. He ran all the way home to his mother in their house on the edge of Haifa and told her breathlessly of the terrible news. There were many tears and fearful wails and the remaining members of the family joined so many of their old neighbors and friends in the safer lands east of Al Quds.

Zionist Organization to settle the desert lands south of Al Quds. Because of the resilience of Bedouin communities inherent to their transient lifestyle, they were able to remain in the Israeli-controlled part of Palestine despite the war of 1948, in which many of their Palestinian neighbors living in stationary towns saw their homes destroyed and were forced to move into the West Bank and Gaza. This law is an assault aimed specifically at Palestinian Bedouin communities, and the arable land is an accidental casualty.

The land surrounding Haifa in the 1940s looked very different from the dry patches of European pines that grow there today. Much of it was agricultural villages, and many of these have been razed to the ground in the years directly following 1948. Of the land that wasn't built upon, much of it was planted with oranges and limes and olives and apricots and a wide variety of other flora. Some of this grew wild and was not tended, and if it was harvested it was harvested occasionally by the Bedouins and by their grazing herds. Much of it was fruit trees tended by the local farming villages. These trees, planted and wild-growing alike, were torn up from the ground as well, and on top of the rubble, in all the places they could not yet build houses, Israelis planted European pines, which send thick roots down and tough branches up and made it impossible for returning Palestinians to rebuild their homes. Their needles shed from these trees leached acid into the soil and made it barren and inhospitable to the native flora and the common crops. It is no longer possible to grow oranges in much of the land around Haifa.

After his family fled the occupying army during al-Nakba, Abdul Kareem spent the rest of his childhood in Yabrud, a small farming village just up the road from Bir Zeit and north of Ramallah. Yabrud is at the top of a small mountain, or a large hill, terraced and planted with many olive trees, some of which today are too thick for a grown man to clasp his arms around.

Naila was sixteen, she says, and he finally tracked her grandmother down and came by to visit. “And he saw us, and we saw him, and that’s what happened.”

Growing up in Yabrud, Abdul Kareem knew much about Naila’s home. The village is twenty minutes from Bir Zeit by car, and the walking route is slower but more direct, if you are on friendly terms with all the families who own olive groves between Yabrud and Bir Zeit. Usually, he was.

Though he had spent a lot of time in Bir Zeit during his youth and his early twenties, she does not remember ever meeting him. She was young enough then that a man thirteen years older than her would have blended easily in to the crowd.

It was three years since Naila had left Palestine. From the shape her life had taken, and from the continued presence of the occupation, she knew she might never call it home again. Her new state, Jordan, had an uncomfortable relationship with the occupiers. The king of Jordan, King Hussein, was engaged in peace talks with Israel and the US. To the soldiers of the resistance—the PLO—and to many other Palestinians, “peace” under occupation meant surrender. Unmistakably this was the goal of the Israeli government. Palestine was under Israeli control, international law notwithstanding, and if the PLO guerrillas (“terrorists”) would only stop making such a scene, then Israel’s regime would be nicely established. Palestinians wanted peace, to be sure, but there would be no real peace while Palestine remained under Israeli control, only further occupation, further restrictions of autonomy, and further efforts to put all the land in Jewish hands in the name of Zionism. To Yasser Arafat and many other Palestinians, the decision of King Hussein to engage in these talks was a decision to turn his back on the Palestinians and surrender to US influence. He was a traitor.

(Lustick 1980:11)<sup>6</sup>. The poem was published in Arabic in 1964, and it was subsequently adopted as a song of resistance, heard widely. The idea that having Palestinian children would anger and threaten the Israeli state was pervasive and it was well-backed by Israel's policy of pronatalism only as far as Jewish families were concerned:

The contradiction between Zionist goals and social goals was made clear by the fate of the Ben-Gurion prize awarded to every woman delivering her tenth child. Created in 1949 to stimulate Jewish natality, the prize was discontinued ten years later, and "one of the reasons was apparently that many Arab women received it" (Friedlander 1974: 57). In order to address this kind of counterproductive outcome, Ben-Gurion later proposed that pronatalist programs be managed by the nongovernmental Jewish Agency instead of the government.<sup>7</sup>

It was clear to Naila growing up that the occupiers did not want women like her having children. And therefore by having Palestinian children, she would contribute to the resistance. She had four. They were all Palestinian, though none of them were born in Palestine. That would not have been her choice, but many of her choices may have come out differently if it were not for the occupation.

There is also the question of her life. What about the rest of her adolescence? War ages you fast.

Her whole life had been touched by it. Until 1967, Palestinians in the West Bank lived under Jordanian rule, without the constant military presence, the checkpoints or the midnight arrests. But Abdul Kareem was not the only displaced person who frequented the town of Bir Zeit. Naila knew many, and she knew their stories. Stories which, like Abdul Kareem's,

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6 Rhoda Ann Kanaaneh, *Birthing the Nation: Strategies of Palestinian Women in Israel*, University of California Press, 2002. Pg. 65.

7 Philippe Fargues, "Protracted National Conflict and Fertility Change: Palestinians and Israelis in the Twentieth Century", *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 26, No. 3, September 2000. Pg. 458.

On June 7<sup>th</sup> Israeli soldiers occupied Al-Quds, and Naila's grandmother stayed inside with the shutters closed tight while she listened to the gunfire in the streets below. The next day, they came to Bir Zeit. Naila's mother and father had a choice to make. The stakes were high, and they didn't have long to deliberate. Their neighbors were fleeing in droves—any truck driving east was hailed down for a ride to Jordan, and safety. Many people in Bir Zeit were choosing to stay. Naila's cousin Nejwa and her family locked their doors and kept away from the windows, and didn't leave. Her grandmother stayed put in her home in Al-Quds. They risked isolation, separation from any loved ones who left. Many had already been separated from their family or from dear friends in 1948, although Naila hadn't been born then, and had grown up never knowing these people.

Yisra and Rubin chose to leave.

“But it never happened,” Naila said, the isolation they had feared. The borders of Gaza are sealed tight right now, and they have been for many years. But the West Bank is not under siege in such a way. People can visit. “Visit, only.” she pointed out, “Like me and you, how we went to visit.” We visit with American passports and three-month tourist visas.

Yisra and Rubin had instead consigned themselves to a different type of isolation. They were separated from their home, from their land. They could go back for brief visits, and see their family again, but they would never be able to live in their home. Their children would not grow up in Bir Zeit, and their grandchildren would hardly know the place. Most of their family remained scattered about Palestine—many relatives in Bir Zeit, many in Al Quds, many in small villages. Some, who they hadn't seen for twenty years, had remained in their homes in 1948 when the western parts of Palestine were occupied.

*Chapter three*

I planned to interview Naila for the second time on a Thursday in January. The day before, the police had come to her house, asking for her son.

She explains to us, “They found a gun in Santa Rosa. A robbery, they thought it was his gun. And of course, he wasn’t here.” She took another drag. “They asked me, ‘You know Mohammed Yasin?’. I said, ‘Yes, I know him. What’d he do?’”

She pauses, giving us time to laugh. Mohammed, her youngest son, is the family troublemaker. It isn’t her first visit from the cops on his account. “‘He have a gun?’, I said ‘Yeah.’ I’m not going to tell them he has more than *a* gun.”

We laugh again, because it’s funny, but it is clear now that she is shaken, and we are nervous to hear how this story ends.

She tells us piece by piece. “I called Hammed at work. Thank god, he answered. You know, sometimes he doesn’t answer. I said, “Mohammed, where’s your gun?! Your handgun, you got it from Wael. They found your gun in Santa Rosa!”

He protested, he was sure they did not. It was in the lock-box under his bed. The police followed Naila through her house, into her son’s bedroom. She knelt by his bed with him on speakerphone, but a policeman immediately intervened and told her to stand aside. (“It’s not loaded!” Mohammed told them through the phone.) He told them the code, and the gun was just where he had said.



exchanged for a wide counter. “So all of us can cook together!” My sister loves the idea, and we look at cabinets in a Home Depot catalog as she whisks the addas. We consider finishes. She prefers a dark, warm stain on maple wood, which is advertised as durable and easy to clean. My sister Cleo says her choice will compliment the stainless steel fridge and stove, which she had installed two years ago.

She’s old enough to retire, and with social security and the money she has saved, she would be able to live comfortably, but she keeps a full-time job at a grocery store nevertheless. She says she needs the money to provide for her children—the youngest of whom are in their thirties and all with jobs of their own—but she means she needs the money to treat her children and herself. She buys plane tickets and flies us to Jordan and to Palestine for special occasions, and she puts the rest into her house. Mostly, into the yard and the kitchen. Her bedroom is clean and comfortable, but nothing is very new. Her kitchen gleams. Her deck and vegetable garden are the gems of the neighborhood (though as her granddaughter I might be biased).

We eat our soup in the kitchen over the cabinetry catalogs. It is simple, she describes the process to us as she whisks the lentils into a pulp. Onion, halved lentils, broth, and a smattering of spices. No blender required.

I try following her recipe later, in my own cramped kitchen in New York. It doesn’t have the same smooth texture that hers always does. I think I lack her patience.

We have the soup first, then hot tea with sugar and mint.

Mohammed, calls her from work. They talk a bit in Arabic, too fast for me to pick up much. Her tone is a few breaths short of angry. She asks him where he was yesterday, in words I

printed and stamped by the Israeli government, passed muster at the American embassy and Naila got her visa.

Despite how little they were able to bring with them, Naila's family knew the move was permanent as they prepared to leave. The fear that they would be imprisoned in Bir Zeit, the way that Palestinians who remained in Gaza are imprisoned now, drove them out. Naila's two eldest brothers were out of the country, one in Kuwait, one in Lebanon. Her parents fled with their younger children rather than risk permanent separation from their two oldest sons. In later years it became clear that their main fear hadn't been realized, but it was too late. They had lost their Palestinian citizenship when they left in 1967. Their only way back was through a visa, which could only be obtained with the right kind of passport and a lot of patience. It lasts three months.

Naila recalls her parents realizing that they could have stayed in Palestine without losing their sons. "They feel guilty, because they moved to Jordan...they wanted to stay in their home, they had a house, they had land, and they miss everything because they can't go back. To visit, only." It was not Naila's decision to leave, of course. She was thirteen, or so, and had that many years of experience growing up in post-Nakba Palestine to color her understanding of the Israeli occupiers, but relatively little historical information about them, or about the war in 1948.

Naila did not learn about the war in school at all. The school was run by Jordanians, of course, not Israelis, but the Jordanian king (which was Hussein at the time) was friendly with the Israelis and the Israelis did not want the war taught to Palestinians in school. It was taught in Israeli schools as a war of independence, but in Palestinian schools it was a "corruption", which could not be spoken of.

Abdul Kareem was never able to visit Palestine after that war, but by bringing his wife to America, he made it possible for her to return to her childhood home many years later. After his passing, she visited his own childhood hometown of Haifa for the first time. She knew no one living there, only the family that accompanied her on her visit. She saw Haifa, and the Mediterranean, for the first time in her life two years after her husband's death.

For the year before his death, my grandfather could not speak English. That is how Alzheimer's works. Things are forgotten in more or less the order they were learned. For two years, he could not remember my name. But I'd remind him I was his granddaughter, or let him remember me as some other relative from a past I knew little about. We could talk. I asked him about Naila, he remembered her well. He asked me about his fruit trees. He was too sick to leave his bed, so I went into the yard and came back with eskadinas for him when they ripened. And the next Sunday when I returned, he couldn't remember the word for 'outside' for half an hour, until my dad came in from the garage to translate for us. That night, Papa taught me to write my name in Arabic.

It happened very quickly, and before winter I could only sit by his bed and pick words out of his conversations with Naila, my dad, and his siblings. I learned more Arabic that year than I had learned in the first twelve years of my life combined, and I spoke as much of it as I could for Abdul Kareem, but if there was no one in the room to translate, he would fast forget my handicap and become frustrated when I wouldn't respond to his requests and his questions.

By the next winter, he lay in a white shroud, resting on his side with his face towards Mecca and six feet of dirt over him.

satisfied with her coffee, but she found something else to keep busy with as soon as my mother had pried the coffeepot from her hands. She hosted a house packed with relatives beautifully, and conducted all the women in the kitchen like a Mozart symphony. But her hands shook whenever they weren't holding a sharp knife or a hot pan, and whenever there was a lull I would find her smoking on the back deck, pretending not to cry.

“Siti?”

“Habibti, what's the matter? Are we out of oil?”

“No, nothing's wrong. Are you okay?” I asked her.

“Of course, Siti,” she called me that sometimes, I guessed it made sense in Arabic. “It's all the smoke in there, your aunt keeps burning the kubbeh.” She took a long drag, stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray and ushered me inside ahead of her so she could turn on the oven fan.

“Ghada, go see if anyone needs coffee. I'm doing this,” she stated, and took the wire spoon for the kubbeh out of her daughter's hand. Ghada said something angry in Arabic and stomped out of the room, and my mother handed me the coffeepot.

When the house was full of people and we had been there for a few days, my mother decided she needed a break. I also was yearning for just an hour to spend alone, so we drove to Tomales with my little brother, and told Wael we'd be back before dinner.

My mother got a text as we pulled into town, and turned around in the lot outside of the general store. We didn't get out of the car, just drove two hours back to Novato. He passed as Naila was in their bedroom, washing up for her afternoon prayer. My dad, who doesn't often pray, was at his side.

thinking it would be nicer if we could spend the night, take our time. In the end, we planned only a day trip.

We had avoided Qalandia, the main checkpoint in the wall and the crossing situated between Ramallah and Al Quds, because we had sat in the car for an hour on a hot Wednesday waiting our turn for inspection, and we knew better than to go near it on a Friday.

We took a north road out of Yabrud that morning in our rented Mazda with yellow plates. I hadn't seen much of Palestine yet, besides the routes between Ramallah and Bir Zeit and Yabrud. We'd driven in from Jericho, from the King Hussein Bridge, in the dark and arrived in Yabrud at 11 PM despite leaving Amman at daybreak. So I had seen little of the Palestinian countryside away from the cluster of towns where my family lived. In the daytime, the drive through the terraced hills of olives and the occasionally sweeping wheat field felt like driving through an illustration in a storybook. It took me an hour to recognize the story—it was one that my grandfather had told my siblings and I. Something about a kid walking up and down the terraces all day, between his mother in the house at the top of the hill and his father, down in the field below. To us as children, a story taking place in Palestine could have taken place in Never Never Land just as easily. I knew it was a real place, I knew of the political situation from my father. I had read a few books about Palestine before going to visit. But the drive through the terraces that morning brought all my scattered bits of information into sharp relief. The dreamy Palestine of stories was the same Palestine they talked about on NPR.

I was pulled abruptly from this dream when we arrived at the wall. Naturally, there was a checkpoint and naturally it was manned by soldiers with guns. It was a slow day at the crossing north of Tulkarm. There were two soldiers standing by the booth at the roadside, which looked

going as smoothly as he hoped. His jaw tightened. He gripped the gearshifter, settled in park, like he was considering throwing it into gear and driving away. The woman with the gun held all of our passports, so of course we weren't going anywhere.

"Naila Yasin," he answered with as even a tone as he could muster.

"I need you to get out of the car."

My dad unlatched his door, but she pushed it closed from outside.

"Hold on. You have any weapons? A gun? For self-defense, maybe?"

He eyed her automatic rifle. "No gun. I have a knife in my pocket. For self-defense."

My mother put her hand over her face and Naila looked furious. The soldier put a hand on her gun.

"Stand up and turn towards the car." She opened his door, and when he stood with her back to him, she took his knife from the pocket of his Carhartts. She handed this off to a soldier who had been smoking at the curb. Their cigarettes were all put out now. He took the knife and indicated that my dad was to follow him. We watched Papa follow the soldier into the small building, and none of us spoke. Naila was white as a sheet.

"You all get out. Take your bags, go in there." Around me, the car suddenly buzzed with movement. I had fixed my gaze on the door that shut behind my dad. I saw a soldier bringing a sheepdog on a harness from another door. "Get out now!" she repeated.

"Juliet!" my mother's voice startled me, and I turned around to find the barrel of an automatic rifle staring me in the face. It was inches from my forehead. I traced my eyes down the barrel to the face of the woman holding it. She had a white blob of gum between her teeth and she looked annoyed.

When the search was over, the woman who had stopped us initially walked over, passports in hand. “Is she really your mother?” she asked my dad.

“Of course I’m his mother!” Naila answered indignantly. Our passports were distributed, and double-checked, and put safely back into their bags. We piled into the small car once again, and drove forward to Haifa, stopping only once to buy lemonade and stretch the tension out of our shoulders.

“It’s our names,” posited my dad. “Our names don’t match.”

“You insisted on changing yours back,” Naila reminded him.

We did not visit her husband’s former house, it has been destroyed. The neighborhood is impossible to recognize from my grandfather’s stories of warm and breezy orange groves, narrow roads hemmed with fruit trees. Haifa itself has become a different place. Though no one in our party of travelers had seen Haifa as a Palestinian city, we had a clear sense of what wasn’t there.

There were wide streets paved in blacktop, parking spaces marked by white lines in front of storefronts that had been built in the 1970s, or early 80s. It felt more like California than Palestine, but not like home at all.

Around lunchtime on a Friday, we walked several blocks in search of a sandwich shop, or a cafe. When we went places as a family, we looked for loud and busy restaurants where we won’t stand out as much—there were ten of us that day, and all very loud. We found an Arab pub serving hummus and fatoosh alongside pub staples like burgers and fries, with several beers on tap. We took a table out front and watched the afternoon unfold beside a wide American-style road in Abdul Kareem’s old town.

Naila, feminists are exclusively Westernized women, and usually too interested in getting men's attention. She doesn't despise them, she knows her own daughter calls herself a feminist and she is very proud of her daughter for all that she has been able to accomplish. It just isn't how she would describe herself, and she doesn't trust people who try to put her in that box.

Though Naila is a devout Muslim, she does not cover her head when she goes out of the house, and she never has. She covers her head five times a day, prays, and removes her veil. If she goes to pray outside of her home, in a mosque, she will put her veil on while standing at the steps, and then go in. She never puts it on ahead of time, though she notices the disapproving looks she receives from other men and women going in to pray.

This has nothing do to with whether or not she is a feminist. But to many people in the west, the veil symbolizes women's subordination and a Muslim woman's choice not to wear it symbolically aligns her with feminism.

In Palestine, the veil carries an entirely different connotation. It has a connection with the resistance movement dating back to the First Intifada beginning in 1987, and the years leading up to that. Through this, it fast became associated with the religious parts of the nationalist movement, and now it is fairly uncommon to see Muslim women of any political alignment leaving their heads uncovered in public. But when Naila lived in Palestine, the veil was mainly associated with social class—it was worn by women from wealthy Muslim families, and in rural agrarian communities like Bir Zeit it was uncommon.

Though Naila is aware of all these possible meanings which can be attached to her habits of covering her head, her choice was not complicated. Her mother did not cover her head. Her sister did not cover her head. Many pious women in Bir Zeit did not wear any type of veil. It was



There has been tension between the religious fundamentalist parts of the movement and those with more secular politics. This tension has been leveraged against the movement by the Israeli occupiers as a type of “divide and conquer” strategy. The secular parts of the movement have often been the same or intertwined with the leftist Palestinian activists, who were working towards anti-imperialist solidarity between all the facets of working-class society in Palestine since the times of the British Mandate. However, during the Cold War there was a concerted effort on the part of the US government, working mostly through the CIA, to destroy any leftism or communist movements existing in the third world. The secular left in Palestine fell victim to this imperialist project, and it was weakened considerably by American involvement in the region. Meanwhile, the efforts to destroy the Palestinian religious right were muted by comparison, and Hamas’s present-day popularity is evidence of the aftermath of this project.

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Naila breaks a lot of the rules which govern women’s conduct in Palestinian society today, some of which are new and some of which are not. The prevalence of the hijab grew significantly after she left, and she never felt much pressure on that front while living in Palestine.

It not acceptable in Abdul Kareem’s family, which Naila is part of since their marriage, for women to smoke cigarettes, and especially for them do so sitting on the front porch and looking into the street. Many women in Yabrud smoke, but they will slip quietly out the back door and stand on the other side of the patio and light a cigarette outside of the view of their husbands and fathers. Naila sits in front of the house with the men, drinking coffee, and lights her cigarette without any embarrassment. Her brothers, who come from the Al-Zettawi family

*Afterword*

In the beginning I imagined this project as a search for the feminist narrative in my grandmother's story. Where did her path cross with the women's movements in Palestine? How did the men in her life, in conjunction with the occupation, shape her choices? I asked her about her mother, and her grandmother, about her marriage. I researched the women's movements of the Middle East during my grandmother's youth and looked for her in their histories, and her in theirs. I tried these questions onto her story at this angle or that one. They didn't fit. She does not talk about her past with these questions in mind. There are a lot of things I could say about the impacts of Israeli occupation on the lives of Palestinian women. But I was not writing about the Israeli occupation or about Palestinian women, I was writing a story about my grandmother. The feminist angle drew me in because I wanted to contradict the narrative that Israel, advertising itself as "the only democracy in the Middle East", brings liberation and progressivism to the women of Palestine, and frees them from the restrictions of a Muslim society. The fact is, I didn't need a feminist analysis to accomplish that. Just telling Naila's story makes it clear how much progressivism Israel has to offer Palestinian women.

In Arabic class, when we were asked to write a response to the topics at play in Ghassan Kanafani's *All That's Left to You*, I wrote about huq al-'auda—the right of return. It is a legally established right of Palestinian refugees, stipulated somewhere in the founding documents of UNRWA. The state of Israel does not recognize it, and there is no really pressure to adhere to UN doctrine unless a member state with a powerful army, such as the US, decides they have a vested interest in enforcing the doctrine in this particular case. Usually this coincides with the discovery

home. The village was called Saffuriyya in Arabic. In 1948, it was destroyed. Tzipori is the Hebrew name of the Israeli settlement built on top of the ruins. They walk around the land, visiting the site of their old home and speculating as to where exactly things were. This is the first time Yasmin has seen her father's birthplace. They come to a playground, and Yasmin, who is around ten, suggests they go down to it. Ali agrees, but when they get closer he starts reading off of the sign by the path. "This park is for residents of Moshav Saffuriyya. Entrance to strangers is absolutely forbidden" It is written in Hebrew, then Arabic. In Arabic, the name of the town is Saffuriyya—Ali's hometown that has been destroyed. His daughter becomes uneasy and insists they leave, but Ali refuses. "Avi, come film this!" he says. "I am a stranger, here I go," and walks deliberately passed the sign. His daughter protests that he is going to get arrested, and leaves. She marches back up to the road in a hurry but later, after he catches up with her and they rejoin Tamim, she changes her mind. She is prepared to face the risks so that her uncle Tamim can see the sign. She leads the way back down to the playground (hadiqa, a garden) and reads from the sign in Arabic. She stumbles at the word "stranger". The Israeli sign-writer has misspelled it. The word 'stranger' shares a root with the word for longing for one's home. By making Ali out to be the 'stranger' in the garden built on the remains of Saffuriyya, the sign-writer had told the viewers exactly who Ali really is—a man displaced from his home.

Mahmoud Darwish imagined a conversation with an Israeli soldier in a poem published in 1967 called "A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips". He asks the soldier, "And the land? *I don't know the land*, he said./*I don't feel it in my flesh and blood, as they say in the poems.*/Suddenly I saw the land as one sees a grocery store, a street, newspapers./...*All my attachment to the land is no more than a story or a fiery speech! They taught me to love it, but I never felt it in my heart.*/I

Well, it's true—I can't write the step-by-step manual for achieving my fantasy. I can't tell you how to liberate Palestine by next spring. I have never seen it in the spring. I was there for the fall semester, the olive harvest, and I have tried to take those memories and distill the occupation right out of them, just to see what it looks like, but I can't do it. So I turned to Siti and asked her to tell me about growing up in Bir Zeit. What did the town look like before the Israeli soldiers came? I know what it looks like after, I have seen it after. I see videos on Facebook of soldiers dragging handcuffed students into armored vehicles at Bir Zeit university. I have tasted the tear gas they fired on students at Al Quds University. We crowded into the few classrooms with air conditioning, and cranked it up high to purge the air of the gas, and then we all went back to class.

All of my memories of Palestine are like this—the olive harvest, coffee and conversation in stilted Arabic at a cheerful cafe by the campus, and then the occupation interrupts. Three military vehicles drive by, and maybe that's an indication of trouble. That means they might close Qalandia checkpoint early tonight, and anyone who is going home to Al Quds that night hurries out the door. It affects all aspects of life. Trying to have a normal day is an act of resistance.

I can't see a liberated Palestine in my own memories of the place. I am looking to the past for a more hopeful image, to my grandmother's memories. She had thirteen precious years in her home before Israeli soldiers occupied the town of Bir Zeit, but Palestine was not free.

In the end of Darwish's poem, the soldier gives up on the homeland and goes in search of white tulips and an olive branch. "Homeland for him, he said, is to drink my mother's coffee, to return, safely, at nightfall"<sup>10</sup>. I am not looking for an olive branch, I am looking for the trees.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 167.

