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1

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Inherit the Tombstones

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The Unwritten

The end of the story is getting closer. I can feel it on my neck, the breath of the story I have been hearing for almost fifty years. My wandering from one story to another will finally come to an end. The only woman who has lived the story, my mother, will end it just as we had started it together, my mother, my grandfather and I. Fifty years ago I was a boy of four standing between a mother and a grandfather. A carefree boy I was, idling around, playing and waiting for my father to come home. The sun had already set that evening when my grandfather dropped my mother off and went back to the big house. While I slept in her arms, my mother stayed awake, looking out of the window and caressing my hair absent-mindedly. Her face was red, very red, and her eyes were wet. I stood between the two of them again in the morning. She gazed. She waited. She returned. One of the city storytellers said that Israeli soldiers had killed a man near the military camp when they were setting up checkpoints.

One of those soldiers is guarding me now, nearly fifty years later, as I make my way to prison, or will it be death? Hot air and the sweat clinging to my body bring me close to the stories I had heard and would later write down. The next morning I woke up with a fright. I jumped out of my bed under the window of our house overlooking the valley in Em al-Basateen. My mother was screaming. I could almost see her scream make a cut in her throat. She was running towards the valley. My grandfather was running after her. He tried to reach out to her. She fell on the ground but got up right away. He caught up with her at the other end of the valley. He put his cloak around her shoulders. He brought her into the house. My grandfather's eyes, I can see them even now, were black, sharp, and unmoving. I could hear his teeth grinding against each other. I was weeping, worried sick about them, and fearful of my mother's fear, of how unfamiliar my grandfather looked that day.

One of the villagers said that two days ago the soldiers who had seized Nablus stopped a man on his way home from school. They stopped him and killed him. A passerby from a nearby village said that the soldiers stopped the man in front of a tank. They asked him to raise his hands above his head after they had taken away his books. When his hands were raised, they shot two bullets into his chest. He fell. He started to bleed. The soldiers waited until the afternoon then asked two men they had detained to dig a grave by the roadside between the city and the military camp, exactly three metres away from the main road. The soldiers made those two men bury him before leading them back to the military camp the day after the Six Day War.

Since then I have been hearing the same story about my father's death over and over again. For the longest time I thought my mother and grandfather were evil, I was almost certain, for they were the ones who told me the story and kept telling it as if to make sure that everyone knew the unknown martyr, the name given to the roadside grave at the end of the sixth day of the war and at the beginning of migration to the city, was my father. After a week of waiting for news and stories, my grandfather would learn that the man buried in the roadside grave was a teacher. He was going home from school. He was wearing a white shirt and a pair of blue trousers. He was

carrying two history books for the sixth grade in his hands. He was tall and thin. He was in his twenties. People from the nearby village would say that this teacher was the son of Sleiman el-Saleh, a man forced out of Ein Hawd village near Haifa, who came to Em el-Basateen to build a house that looked exactly like his old house in Ein Hawd. From that moment I would be known as the only son of the unknown martyr.

When my grandfather brought my mother home, he said to her, let's hope for the best, but she said, teetering, he hasn't been home for two days, I told him not to go out, it's too dangerous outside, he didn't listen and left, and he's not back yet. My mother came to me and clutched me to her. I asked her where's my father. She said, as she brought water to wash my face, he'll be home, God willing, he'll come home. My father never came home.

My ageing mother would tell me again fifty years later, "don't go, darling, let the dead lie in peace, stay with me, bury me," and I would say to her, "mother, I'll be back in a day or two." She held on to me, "let the dead rest in peace, God will have mercy on him." For fifty years I've had to live in the memories of two graves and stories of two houses. Laila should be alone now, in my house separated from me by a sea and an ocean, sleeping on her bed covered in white linen, thinking that she is waiting for her father who has gone to look in on his mother and to make sure the grandmother she's never seen is in good health, or maybe she will be hearing of the execution of her father the murderer. I will not be able to go back to Rebecca, the only woman who truly loved me, the only woman I have been with. My family will read in the newspapers about my betrayal and execution. Perhaps.

On the first anniversary of the Naksa my grandfather would carry me and take my mother to the main road connecting Em al-Basateen with the Eastern Gate of Nablus. There, we would stop on the roadside, my mother would fall on her knees, and I would run away in fear. I would see that look in my grandfather's eyes again, as he gathered his *kufiyya* around his head. I would read the *Fatiha* for the soul of my father "the unknown martyr," and would catch looks of confusion, surprise, and pity on the other side of car windows. I see that day clearly even now. My mother stepped towards the grave. She caressed the earth gently. My grandfather recited the *Fatiha*. We went home. My mother curled up in a corner and wept. My grandfather took me away. He put me on the horseback behind him. He was covered in sweat. He said to me, "hold on to me, *sayyidi*, hold on tight."

My grandfather was afraid I would fall off the horse. The horse took us to the distant field where he planted olive trees. I hugged my grandfather tightly from the back. The farther the horse went the tighter I held on to him. I pressed my cheek against his back. I fell asleep, inhaling the smell of his sweat. The horse stopped. I woke up. My grandfather carried me down. He put me under a big olive tree and walked away. He took long to come back to me. He had turned his back to the west and was squatting, leaning against a higher ground in the field. I walked towards him. I got near. I stood behind him. I heard him weep. He held me tight in his arms. I can still smell his sweat hanging on to my nostrils. He said, may God have mercy on your father's soul, and I knew I would not see my father again.

Fifty years later I would regret sleeping through that day. I did not wake up to say goodbye to him. Only whispers and touches and a soft "my darling" would remind me

of my father. I would grow up hearing my grandfather's stories of his birth in Ein Hawd, of our house, of the wood trunks inside and the stonewalls outside, of the village graveyard, of Mount Carmel and of Istiqlal Street. I was brought up on these stories. I lived between two graves, two villages and two houses, if not also two "lords." I still do.

When I was older, I would try to see with my mind's eye my father's body buried underneath the soil. I would learn that I was and would always be the unknown martyr's son. I would continue to visit the two graves even after it had become known that my grandfather had moved my father's body to a new grave near our house in Em el-Basateen two years later. I would feel my mother take me into her arms for a tight embrace, when I wept for my father and for the fact that I would never be able to hold his hand again. I would hear her tell me, "Your father is here, among us now."

When I was even older, I would live on the stories grandfather Sulaiman told me. He woke up early. I sat behind him on the horse. We rode to Tel el-Basateen, a field terrace spreading out from the East to the West, which my grandfather would fill with the olive trees and grape vines he would plant. But he would always look at our house and tell me about the carob tree he had also planted so that he would wake up to the smell of Ein Hawd in the morning.

When he served breakfast he would say, I would be looking at the sea this time of the day in Wadi Bustaan, from which water flowed to the sea. He would daydream, look towards the west, and describe the morning dew, and the mist that softened the cactus thorns. Your father was born four years before the occupation of Ein Hawd, he would say. I used to put him under the carob tree, whose roots became exposed when the stone hedges around it fell away. My father planted the tree in the south corner of our stone house at the centre of our village. He would describe the house as he sat facing west. Stonewalls surrounded the house, he would say, and your great grandfather cut the stones one by one with his own hands. It had a gate in the shape of an arch that opened out into a stone courtyard, and from there you would proceed to the great hall, the barn, and the guesthouse. To the west of the house, and facing the sea, a set of stone steps led up to the roof from which you would see the blue mist of the sea through a web of thick forest. You would smell it too.

He would go on, describing the house, the carob tree, and the four cypresses my great grandfather Saleh planted in 1935 alongside the stone steps. My grandfather would linger on the step, the second step to be precise, where he would sit when he drank his morning tea. I remember seeing your great grandfather Saleh slaughter three goats when I was about twelve. He invited all the villagers to a banquet at the only mosque in the village centre. The outer courtyard of the mosque was transformed into an extension of our courtyard, and I had to move all the cookery and cutlery, and all the food and dishes from our house to the mosque. I exhausted myself carrying pitcher and basin from one guest to another so they could wash their hands.

I would listen to these stories. I would pretend to be neutral. I would grow older, and so would my grandfather. I would start school. The trees would cover Tel el-Basateen, and our carob tree would grow bigger. My grandfather would continue to repeat the story on our way back to our house up one of Nablus hills sprawling across Mount Gerizim. Our house, high up on the hills, faced west. My grandfather modeled

its design on our house in Ein Hawd. But he built more rooms. He would again and again conjure up the twenty-five year old scene before my eyes: I was in my elementary school, and your father, may he rest in peace, was riding behind me. I would listen, sitting behind him on the horseback, with my arms around his waist, and my face pressed against his sweat-drenched coat, inhaling the same smell, the smell of sweat mixed with that of earth and horse, and my head would nod with every bump on the road. The grape vines, the cypresses, and the carob tree would all grow bigger. So would the story, and so would I.

My grandfather would raise his voice: “Listen to me, *sayyidi*, when you set foot in Ein Hawd you will hear the earth speak to you. I saw our carob tree—and her name Em al-Sh’roosh was well known among the villagers—I saw her smile at me whenever I was near. It was like she was waiting for me to come home. The steps, all seven of them, and all six stones of each step, though darkened and overgrown with grass, waited for me to come drink tea with them, and eat zaatar pies your grandmother baked by their side. I always looked west to see through the grass and trees covering the red earth the sun light and evening mist reflected on the surface of the sea.” He would repeat the story a million times: “In Ein Hawd the trees, blackberry shrubs and wild apple groves are so thick you can’t see the earth especially during rain. And the scent wafting to the house from the grape vines through Wadi Bustaan and Wadi Fallaah, that indescribable scent, of kneading earth and flower in river water. The sun rays would disappear into the sea only to emerge again from the East, your great grandfather Saleh used to tell me.”

We would reach the house and he would tie his horse and say, “when you look to the East in Ein Hawd, with Mount Carmel arching over the earth and the Mediterranean Sea behind you, you will see Haifa to your left. Her houses looked like white dots and her streets black veins. You will see the sea and the shimmering fine lines of her waves.”

In the evening my grandfather would prepare dinner. My mother would wash my hands and feet. I would know that she had gone to visit my father at his grave. She would hug me, then feed me white cheese dipped in olive oil in front of my grandfather, who would say, “stop feeding him, he’s a big boy now,” and my mother would say, “he will always be my baby even on his wedding day.”

My grandfather would talk about dinners in Ein Hawd, about bird songs, flowers on Mount Carmel, our backyard where he left behind twenty pine, carob and oak trees, in addition to graves of his three forefathers: his father Saleh, his grandfather Mahmoud, and his great grandfather Abderraheem. He would describe the graves, the colour of their stones, the feel of their earth, and the details on their tombstones. He would return once again to dinner on the steps in his house in Ein Hawd, and again and again, to the scent of the sea, to recreate its perfume in my nose, to the beautiful colours of the partridges and sparrows, to the heavenly abyss separating the trees of Mount Carmel from the sand beaches of the Mediterranean Sea, and to his morning walk from the house to Wadi Fallaah.

When I entered the house, I would hear my mother tell me another story as she prepared my bed, “your son’s home, *Ustadh*,” she would call out to him, using the nickname by which my father was known in Em el-Basateen before he became the

unknown martyr. She would repeat, talking to his photo, “your son’s home.” She would count the days, he will always be with us, she would add, speaking to his black and white photo hanging on our wall.